

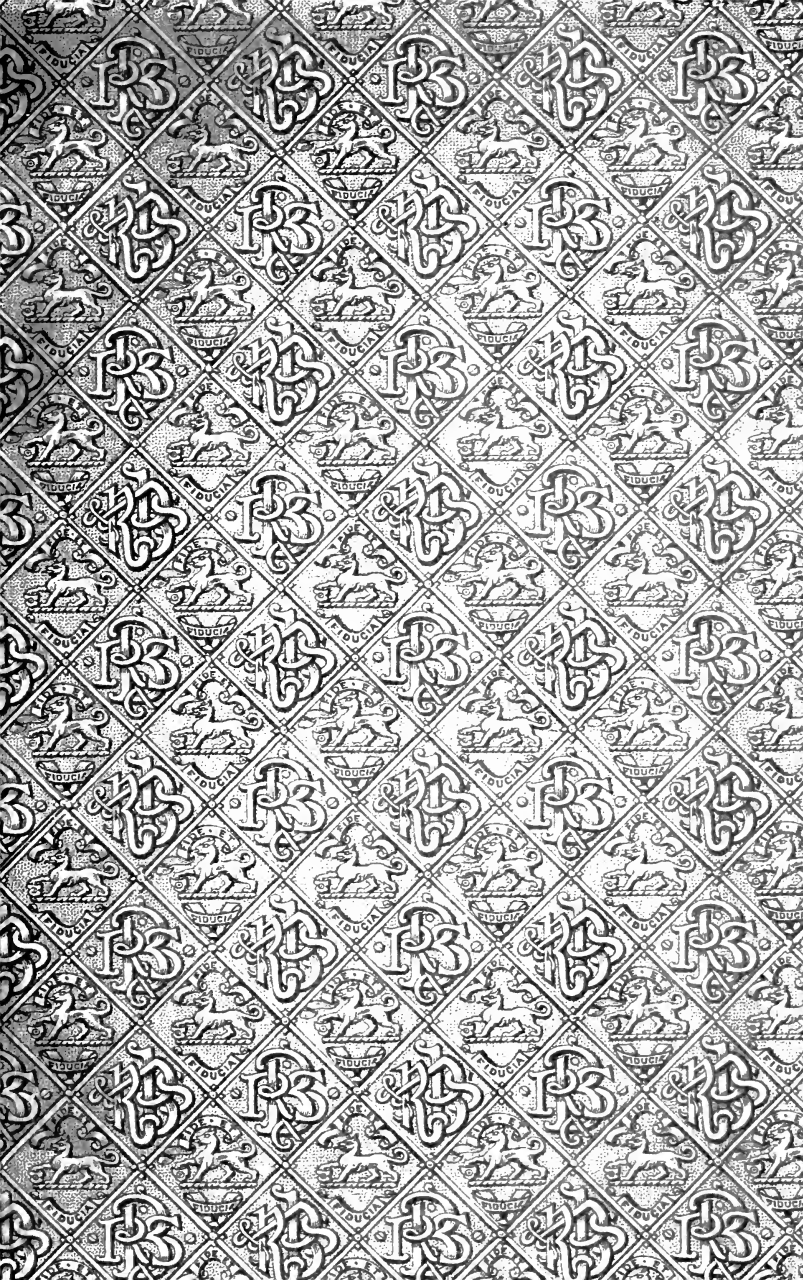
ANDREW TINDALE

VARTY SMITH



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MATTHEW TINDALE.

A Novel.

BY

AUGUSTA A. VARTY-SMITH,

AUTHOR OF "THE FAWCETTS AND GARODS."



IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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MATTHEW TINDALE.

BOOK II.

(Continued.)

CHAPTER VI.

BENEATH THE SURFACE.

To the eye of the superficial observer there was little going on in Staneby during the sunny weeks of September ; the men could be seen still busy in the stackyards, and working while light lasted to cover in the precious grain, but there was no show of anxiety, no sign of hurry and bustle in their movements, such as there had been when they were cutting and carrying the corn. The quoit-playing at the Garod Arms had given place with the shortening days to beer and pipes ; and for

such as did not care about having their quiet smoke at the inn, and who yet wanted a chat with their neighbours, there was the bench on the smithy hearthstone, and for company, Matthew and the half-dozen others who cared little for Mrs. Farrar's ale. The great people from the Hall drove through the village every afternoon, and the lady with the pale, delicate face would sometimes stoop forward and smile at some humble dependent. The Derthwaite carriage with its high-stepping chestnuts, and haughty occupant, who seldom looked to the right or left from beneath the lace of her parasol, would also pass through it. But none of these things broke the quiet spell of rural life which was lying on the village. It is true Neddy Kendal had beaten his wife; but this was such a common occurrence, that after a passing word or two no one ever thought it worth while mentioning the subject again; and there had been a floating bit of gossip, that if Neddy did not look better after himself he would come into collision with Sir William's

gamekeepers about the hares; but even this had not provoked many remarks, for it was tacitly understood by the people of Staneby that not to know too much of Neddy and his doings was a sign of wisdom.

Such were some of the things that appeared on the surface of life in Staneby.

In the meanwhile each person moved in the midst of his or her little world; a world that seemed to the individual who moved in it, busier, more interesting, and infinitely more important than that greater one by which it was enfolded. Of how much greater significance it was to Mrs. Farrar's little maid that her banns were being published, and her name coupled with that of her hobbledehoy for a certain number of Sundays in Staneby Church, than any of the bits of gossip treating of marriage and giving in marriage, which crept down from the housekeeper's room and filtered through the kitchens and stables of Derthwaite and Staneby Hall. And was it not of more import to Bill Taylor of the long legs that

his deposit in the Savings Bank was slowly accumulating than that Sir William Garod should be adding acres to his estate, or that cabinet ministers should be seeking to extend the boundaries of empires? Little Sally's wedding and Bill's savings were but of slight interest to the larger world without, but to Sally and Bill they were the very axis round which the whole world turned.

So it was with Matthew Tindale in these early autumn days. A new influence about which none of his neighbours, not even his mother nor sister, guessed anything, had begun to work upon him, and was now filling all his thoughts; even his Uncle Mark's affairs, and the anxiety which he felt regarding his sister, seemed to pale a little before it, and assume proportions that were less grievous and annoying.

His rose had been received very kindly by Bella Hind, and she had looked more charming when speaking about it than even he had pictured her, pretending to be angry, and then

prettily and coquettishly grateful. If he had been a shy man, he would have felt a little diffident on the morning after the flower had been hidden in the knitting when Bella, pausing in front of the forge, advanced to the window just as Matthew was in the act of flinging back the wooden shutters, and taking the crushed petals from her pocket, laid them amongst the tools on the bench, asking him if he thought they were anything like the colour of his mother's roses which were growing round the cottage door. But Matthew was not diffident on such occasions, and taking up the flower and putting it upon the palm of his hand, looked at it intently, saying there was no doubt about it being like his mother's flowers, and that in fact he believed it must have been gathered from the tree. And here Bella laughed; and then with a toss of her head, and a merry twinkle in her black eyes, asked him if he could tell her who had done "sec a daft-like trick" as hide one of his mother's roses in her knitting; at

which the blacksmith held himself erect, a smile upon his face that rivalled Bella's for merriment, while he said, in answer to her question, that "it was likely some chap who was shy of words, and who wanted her to know that she was thought on by somebody in the village." Then he offered her the faded rose. And here comely little Bella tossed her head, and said she "had no mind for sec like rubbish; if she was to have flowers, let them be real bonny ones, fresh and full of scent." At those words Matthew threw the flower, which was still lying on the open palm of his hand, toward her; and Bella drew back so quickly to avoid being struck by it, that she won a compliment from the blacksmith upon her swiftness of movement. Thereupon Bella took up her rough hawthorn stick, which she had rested against the window, and with that sudden pretty pretence of gravity, which is a woman's not least potent charm, told Matthew that "he was please to remember there was to be no more of such like daftnesses, and if ever

he saw anybody coming and pulling roses from his mother's door, he was to be as good as stop them." So Matthew promised that he would take care no one but himself should pull the roses, while he gave a knowing movement of his head, which sent Bella away from the window with a smile breaking round the corners of her mouth and dimpling her cheeks; a smile which, when she had fairly turned away from the blacksmith, changed into a low but very joyous laugh, as she merrily called to Roany and Blackie and Daisy, her cows, which, with switching tails, and softly breathing muzzles thrust into the long grass, were seizing the opportunity of making a second breakfast.

Matthew stood and watched her through the smithy window. How strong her arm looked as she swung the crooked stick with a flourish which was meant to frighten Daisy into leaving a dainty morsel; how cleverly she ran and intercepted Blackie just as the creature had made up her mind to turn into an open gateway; and how

clearly her voice sounded in the morning air as she called "how, how," to Roany who was pausing with an air of hesitation at the opening of the village lane. What lady in the land could look more trim than did Bella in her buff-coloured bed-gown with brown spots, and the purple petticoat which was short enough to show the clean bold lines of instep and ankle? Where were there squarer, straighter shoulders, and greater depth of bosom to be seen than those which the folds of the buff print covered? and where was there a waist more supple, lithe, and unfettered - looking than that which the leathern belt, with a curved serpent for fastener, enclosed? And then Bella's face, which the cotton sun-bonnet shaded! Were there rounder or more rosy cheeks to be seen in Staneby? and could any eyes compare with hers for brightness, or a readiness to twinkle merrily? And her lips! Here Matthew paused, for he could find no definite thought concerning them,

and did not dare to think of what their most fleeting touch might be upon his own.

So it was, that as the days and weeks passed, Matthew was more regularly at the window of the forge every morning and evening at the time that Bella and her cows went by. And Bella began to go backward and forward so punctually, that Matthew got at length to feel that he could work quite comfortably, and without making constant excuses to go to the door to see whether she were coming; he had only to look up at his big watch hanging upon the nail in the shutter, to know whether she were near, or to find that perhaps he had still another half-hour to wait. Never was there any conversation to speak of between them: a "Good day," or "The mornings are getting chilly," or "How's yer father?" was usually all that was said. But, both to Matthew and Bella, those greetings had got to be the head and tail pieces, as it were, of each day.

Yet no one in the village knew of

them. No one but Bella could have told how she loitered about the kitchen, until the fingers on the eight-day clock pointed to the time at which she might set out to bring home the cows. No one—not even Matthew—knew how often she left her knitting on the stone bench outside, and how each time she lifted it up she wished she had not spoken so decidedly about the finding of any more roses: it would have been so pleasant to have lifted up the sock, and seen that another had been tucked inside. The neighbours, it is true, noticed that she had bought a fine new hat with straw-coloured ribbons, and *that* at the end of the summer, as some of the economical ones observed; but they did not know why she had bought it. Only little Bella herself knew. Even Matthew, though he noticed the hat on Sunday and thought the wearer looked “as smart as smart,” believed, with the ignorance of man, that it was only donned because it was in the nature of a woman to love fine clothes!

Bella began to feel very happy in those days, though a wish sometimes disturbed her serenity that Matthew would ask her to walk out with him ; for until they began to “keep company,” it would be impossible for her to think that his attentions really meant anything.

Matthew, too, during those weeks of early autumn, was happier than he had been for months past. Sometimes a lawyer's letter from Merton, saying that all inquiries respecting Tom Tindale's widow had failed to recover any trace of either her or her child, would bring a shade of annoyance to his face ; and as he turned over the little stock of sovereigns which were dwindling beneath the heavy demands that advertising made upon it, this expression would change to one of troubled perplexity. But the next day he would only be earlier in the forge, all worry banished, as with lusty arm he worked upon the iron with the determination that, if the hoard of savings were rapidly decreasing, yet more

and better work should be sent out by which it should be replenished. The fear which had taken possession of him that evening at the Garod Arms, when Tom Farrar's wife seemed to hint that his sister had some greater interest in young Mr. Aschenburg's doings than was generally suspected, had gradually loosened its hold. For had not young Mr. Aschenburg left Derthwaite a few days after, and yet Maggie still continued to take her evening walks; only starting a little earlier because the days, she said, so soon closed in, and coming back in consequence, before the twilight had gathered round the forge.

Several weeks passed in this way, until something of the old dislike to the secrecy with which those evening walks were taken, came strongly upon Matthew, and he blamed himself for having allowed a feeling of security to settle upon him, whereby, for a time, all the pitfalls which he believed lay in his sister's path, were hidden from him. So he spoke to

Maggie again upon the subject, and she startled him by saying she went to meet no one ; that he might go with her, if he chose, to the quarry wood, and see for himself that she told the truth. But she had drawn herself up quickly, and although she had turned away her head, it was not before Matthew had seen that her lips were trembling in the endeavour to choke down a sob. His brave heart felt a sudden tightening and the dread, which comes before we ask the question that we know will make our shadowy forebodings, definite things. Then, with a tender, womanly instinct which teaches that a silent assurance of love and careful guardianship, given just at the moment when a chill of desolation has swept over the heart, will sometimes bring the confidence that is desired, he drew her to him. But she only sobbed weakly with her face turned down upon his shoulder. He stooped his head to hers, and with the remembrance of Mrs. Farrar's words running like flame through his mind, he asked, in a low

subdued tone, and hesitating as though he dreaded the answer that would come, if it were Mr. Sidney Aschenburg she used to go to meet through all the summer months? And Maggie, leaning against him, trembled from head to foot; then, with an evident effort for the recovery of self-control, drew herself away from his arm, as, standing erect, she told him, while an expression came into her face that with opposition would grow into one of defiance, that it had been Mr. Sidney Aschenburg whom she used to meet, and that it was Mr. Sidney Aschenburg whom she was going to meet again; that she knew he had only gone away for a little time, and that presently he would come back, and if she so minded, she could be wedded to him, and made his wife.

Maggie looked like a creature whose natural timidity had been laid aside, as she stood before her brother. It seemed as if she did not care what he said to her. It seemed that even cruel words from him could only fall with a passing sting, so closely had some power en-

folded her. And Matthew's eyes slowly turned from hers, and with hands that clenched and unclenched at the thought that his sister had a gentleman for a lover, went into the forge. Always after this Matthew would watch her furtively as she busied herself with domestic matters, noticing the listless bearing of her hands, and, when the light fell athwart her face, that the outline of her cheek was no longer curved, which seeing, he would swear a fierce oath deep down in his heart.

Sidney Aschenburg's departure had been made known to Maggie in a note, which had reached her by the post, the day after he left Derthwaite. It had neither date nor address, and ran as follows :—

“I shall be away until November, when, perhaps, on my return I shall find that you have come to think less about me. Perhaps, however, this would be the wisest thing to do—the best for us both.—S.”

The suddenness of Sidney's departure perplexed and troubled Maggie. That there had been no leave-taking, no warning word concerning his going, although they had met but the evening before, seemed unkind, and she would sit and brood over the fact until a doubt of Sidney's love would creep into her heart. But no sooner had the doubt shaped itself than she would, by a strong effort, cast it away from her, scornfully telling herself that if she loved him, and was beloved by him in return—and, oh yes, of these two things she rested assured—it would be a proof of unworthiness if she were unable thus far to trust him. Why should he not go away from her with a few brief words? she argued with herself. Perhaps, even, it had been done from love of her; or, perhaps—for who could tell?—he had done it because he could not have borne the pain of telling her he must leave her for a time. Thus she would take to herself that crowning glory of a woman, the belief, the whole, perfect, complete belief, in

the nobility of the man she loves—that belief which, if the man be great, will enable him to become greater; if sordid, perhaps less sordid.

Sometimes the words of his letter would come before her, comforting her at times, at others deeply harassing her. It is strange how we tinge the letters we receive, particularly if those letters come from a hand we love, with a meaning that is in accordance with our moods. Thus, Sidney's letter to Maggie would sometimes seem to her as if penned in one of the moments of doubt which comes to passionate love, when the writer fears that absence may bring forgetfulness, this doubt awakening a wild desire in him that if it is to be forgetfulness let it be at once known and faced. Then the lover-like tone of passionate doubt would change, and as water dripping from icicles, so did it seem to Maggie as if the words must have run down from the pen. And here a chill would strike her heart, and she would give one or two tearless sobs. Or

perhaps at another time she would fold her hands together, and with eyes uplifted as if striving to burst through a veil of materialism, would cry in impassioned tones, "God, God, God!" So the days went by, sometimes a peaceful trust in her absent lover filling Maggie's heart, sometimes vague uneasiness and fears.

At length, when September passed into October, these thoughts and emotions gave way to one which was new and all-absorbing. A suspicion—a new dread came to her. In the morning when she awakened a kind of half-consciousness possessed her of some pending danger before which, without recognizing its character, she trembled and cowered down. But as the forgetfulness of sleep slowly rolled away, the suspicion and dread came upon her, and with lips that folded tremulously, and eyes that at times were dim and weary, at others glittering with an unnatural brightness, she would bear her secret with her all day long, until once more sleep came and relieved

her of its presence. It was about this time that Maggie, kneeling morning and evening beside her little wooden bedstead, found passionate words wherein to clothe the definite need that pressed upon her, and prayed to God that Sidney Aschenburg might return.

This was how life was moving over some of the hearts in Staneby, while the placid flow of its surface did nought but mirror the sky.





BOOK III.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE TOILS.

SIDNEY ASCHENBURG left England with the mood upon him which gives a denial to every obligation ; a lawless snapping of the fingers at the consequences of every act ; a determination, joined with the lust of destruction, to break away from all laws, and burst all barriers to reach a goal. Blind and confused, he forgot the resolutions which he had made, and reckless alike of the world's opinion, and the dictates of a conscience whose voice at times yet made itself heard, he determined

that prudence, manliness, and honour should be cast aside.

He would go, so he told himself, where but few communications should reach him; he would not be troubled with anything that might remind him of his past folly. Maggie had a father and mother to look after her, and a brother, whose titanic arm was skilful enough to provide means if necessary for the support of the whole family, so why should he burden his memory with her. Was it not true that women forget the men they love when separated from them? Maggie doubtless would cry a little when she came to know and realize the fact that he had not gone, as he at first intended, for a two months' ramble, but upon a tour which would extend over a lengthened period. But after a time she would cease to think of him; he would fade gradually from her mind; and, as the weeks and months passed away, she would forget that she had ever had a gentleman for a lover, and begin to smile at some rustic, whose rough

ways and uncouth tones would grow pleasant to her ; the past would become as a dream, unless——

But Sidney started away from the thought which would have closed this sentence. It had an ugly, gruesome appearance, and was followed by others, before which he shrank. He had meant no ill to the girl, he argued. She had come by accident across his path, and before he had been aware of it, he had somehow or other fallen in love with her pretty face. It would be hard if he were made to suffer for what he had been led into by force of circumstances. For Sidney, like many far wiser men, clung to the belief that when the seeds of thoughtless acts and evil deeds are sown with no actual intention of wrong-doing, injustice is indeed doled out if thorns and tares are reaped as the harvest.

Besides, and this was a constantly recurring argument with Sidney, was she not as much to blame as he? Ought she not to have known, that no man in his position could

possibly entertain any thought of affection for a village girl beyond that of the hour? Young squires do not commonly make love to rustic beauties with the intention of marrying them, and this Maggie ought to have known. Why should he take all the blame? Why should he harass himself with charges of thoughtlessness, of neglect, want of feeling—nay, even of cruelty? Where was the thoughtlessness which she also had not shared? Where the neglect? But Sidney always got irritated, in a manner not to be borne, when he reached this point in the endeavour to work out parallel lines of blame. It was not Maggie who was neglectful; not Maggie who could be charged with lack of feeling, much less of cruelty, and this Sidney knew. Then he would shift his ground suddenly and go back to the beginning of the argument, telling himself with renewed emphasis, that if he were to blame Maggie was also to blame. She ought to have known his words of love were empty; she ought to have known—her own nature

should have told her—that danger lay beneath the sweetness of his kisses; she ought to have—— Here Sidney would break off scornfully, determined to see his own actions in the light of blamelessness, for as yet he had not come to recognize that the purity of womanhood is a sacred trust laid in the hands of men—a thing wholly apart from woman's duty to herself.

But slowly, very slowly, he came at last to see that, in betraying the trust which Maggie individually had reposed in him, he had irreparably injured the tender confidence which, as with the purity and whiteness of swansdown, enfolds the budding womanhood of every girl. For with one fell swoop he had broken down its sweet barriers of belief and hope; he had shown that love was to be held a thing of light esteem, a pastime, a jest, so that this injury had not been to one, but had extended itself through that one to all women; instead of upholding every trait which is a mark of noble womanhood,

like a foe he had turned his hand against it and had thrust it down.

Meanwhile, slowly and in a dim purblind way, he was beginning to recognize the fact that love, such love as he now felt for Frances Carter, was gradually lifting Maggie upon a higher place in his esteem. He was beginning to regard her very attribute of womanhood as sacred—a thing which lay apart from culture or from birth, apart even from beauty; a thing for whose sake alone she should ever have been revered and honoured. Until, maddened by the self-inflicted agony of these thoughts, he would break into paroxysms of despair. Of what use was this new love to him? Was it going to prove a curse? Was the spell of its gracious influence to work upon him only to show him the warpings of his moral nature? Was it going to wreak itself upon him in such a way that it would drive him back to Derthwaite, bringing about his own undoing by confessing in the face of his mother, guardian, and old asso-

ciates, that, having wronged a village girl, he was returning, so that, so far as he was able, he might atone to her?

Following quickly came wild up-breaking fits of passion, that threatened to urge him to defy every social usage, every restraint that has been imposed by law and custom. He would never go back to Derthwaite. He would put so many miles between himself and that village girl, that there would be no risk of her name being mentioned in his presence. He would get away from his old belongings, his old associates. He would make Frances Carter his; he would carry her off to some unknown island where the days and nights should lengthen out their sweetness to his love. Or, failing this, he would boldly defy fate in its fastnesses, and, going back to Derthwaite, seek to win the love of the girl whom he had met too late. But what of the words of reproach that might be heaped upon him? He would drown them by the clashing of his wedding bells.

Still Sidney Aschenburg pressed onward with the eagerness of one who strives to win a race ; sometimes one mood holding him, sometimes another ; but the determination to get away from the memory of every thing and everybody always asserting its power. The necromances of the east might aid him, some sky might be reached that would spread for him a sheltering curtain from horizon to horizon ; balmy airs were somewhere to be found, pomegranates and the flower of the citron, the soft grey of the olive groves, long low plains, winding rivers, and—forgetfulness. This at length became a kind of *ignis fatuus* to him.

Then suddenly he halted. Many men besides Sidney have tried to rid themselves of care by flight, and then suddenly, and in an aimless fashion, with feelings they cannot analyze, have turned in order to seek the very scenes by which their care was fed. And so without excuse to himself, or

indeed without any clearly defined reason, unless the all-absorbing desire to return might be considered one, he began to retrace his steps.





BOOK IV.



CHAPTER I.

FORECASTS.

SIDNEY ASCHENBURG was seated in the corner of a railway carriage, bending forward, and with eager bloodshot eyes looking out at the landscape which crept slowly past him. In one hand he held his gloves, which he drew through the fingers of the other time after time, striking them impatiently now and again across his knees. The nervous irritability which possessed him showed itself in the strained and painful expression of the eyes, in the tell-tale hollow between the brows, and in the falling in of the face just above the

upper lip. The burning fever of haste which has its seat in some maddening desire of the heart, had laid hold of Sidney's frame, and the blood throbbed and leaped, and the shadows which lay beneath his eyes darkened.

Now he was stooping forward as he caught sight of a gleam of water, and knew it to be the Seine.

"He has made us go at the very devil's own pace," said Watersea, Sidney Aschenburg's valet, whose plump round figure nestled comfortably against the cushions of a second-class compartment.

"Indeed," returned the man sitting opposite, who was glad to find some one who could speak English, but who, nevertheless, chiefly contributed monosyllables as his share in the conversation.

"Not a night have we been in a Christian bed all this past week. Nothing but ride, tear, flash, steam. Victuals! why—anyhow. He gets a B. and S., he does, comfortable sometimes; but he never thinks of offering to

split with me, which, as I say to myself, isn't fair, seeing how I share his flying and tying." The latter word had no precise meaning to Watersea, but it was euphonic.

Nervous fears and imaginings had taken hold of Sidney. The long mental struggle which had gone on before he made that pause which ushered in the retracing of his steps westward, had wrought havoc upon the habitually strong frame. He could not sleep when a halt was made for the purpose of getting a night's rest ; but, tossing and turning, would wish that morning had come, bringing with it the hour of departure. Or if by chance sleep came, it was made hideous to him by a horrible idea of immensity before which he was always flying, a winged fate that appeared to be driving him to his doom.

He had ceased to think distinctly of Maggie, had ceased to think even distinctly of Frances. One thought alone stood out clearly in his mind—he desired to reach Derthwaite by the 11th of October. He had found a letter from

his mother awaiting him at a town on the borders of Hungary ; and in this letter a remark, casually made apparently, and written on the side of the sheet as though it had been an after-thought, acquainted him with the fact that Frances Carter would pay, on the 11th of October, a short visit to Derthwaite on her way from the Highlands. After Sidney received this letter he pressed on for another week eastwards, and then suddenly told his valet he should return home with all speed. He understood vaguely that troubles of all kinds would beset him upon his arrival, and was dull and heavy in consequence, with a feeling of oppression which he vainly endeavoured to shake off. But he never attempted to separate or classify these troubles ; never dwelt on them in any way, although he knowingly admitted them as a background to his thoughts.

It was late in the afternoon when Sidney reached Paris, and for a few hours the rushing past trees and houses and towns had to cease.

Going into the waiting-room he no longer paced up and down, as he had paced during other hours in which he had been compelled to pause, but as one whose every action is expressive of great bodily weariness he sank into the corner of a couch, his head resting on his hand, and his eyes, save when in the course of every few minutes they were turned upon a clock fixed on the wall opposite, roving abstractedly from one object to another. The hand lying idly across his knee twitched nervously. But for this and the movement of his eyes complete repose seemed to have settled upon him. And yet he felt that he was being driven forward with a whirl of swiftness which sickened and turned giddy the brain. All train of connected thought ceased ; his mind occupied with barren tracts of reverie that were vacant of everything saving a dim consciousness of personal existence.

As he sat and watched the slowly moving pointers of the clock, the air became full of the low rustling of leaves and the lapping

of fronds of bracken, sounds he had heard a thousand times in the Derthwaite woods. A feeling of awe-struck horror seized him, and with wide-open eyes, and lips parted to aid the laboured breathing, his spirit shrank before a sense, such as had haunted him hitherto but in his sleep, of the unformed and shapeless immensity, and, or so it seemed to him, his spirit closed with that power which was pursuing him, and struggled and agonized and writhed for life, while the two swayed together over a precipice of doom. A little later and there was a sudden loosening of hold, and, later still, a terrible sense of falling backward into some void, horrible in the intensity of its blackness. Stillness followed, and again the rustling of the leaves, which changed into the rippling sound of water as it eddied and curled above the Devil's Pot.

With a start he shook off the influence. Had he been dreaming, he asked himself, and passed one hand over his forehead, upon which

a cold moisture had gathered. His limbs were trembling as though they had been undergoing some unwonted exertion, and his breath was coming in deep quickly drawn gasps. Hurriedly he rose from his seat, with the determination of leaving the close atmosphere of the waiting-room which had doubtless engendered such a frame of emotion; he would go out upon the platform and walk briskly along its length.

Here the cool air refreshed him, and acted as a restorative to his overstrained nerves, and by the time the train for Calais drew up to the platform, he felt in a more restful mood. He began even to feel that sleep would follow upon the taking up of a comfortable position, with cap drawn down to shade his eyes, and rugs wrapped round him to ward off the chills of an October night. In this he was not mistaken, for before the train had got beyond the barriers of the city he had fallen into a deep and dreamless sleep.



CHAPTER II.

A MAN TO WHOM PEOPLE GO FOR HELP.

It was morning, and Mr. Aschenburg stood in his study with his back turned upon the fireplace, his hands clasped behind him, and his eyes resting from time to time upon the face of a woman, who was seated in an arm-chair which he had turned from the table for her use.

She was an anxious-looking, pale-faced woman, with narrow stooping shoulders. Her thin brown hair was neatly turned back under a coarse straw bonnet, her spare figure was covered with a black cloth jacket of a by-gone fashion, and below that was a pink dress, whose colour had long since faded. Her dark

eyes were dim, habitually dim, for she had wept many tears, and her pale lips had a tremulous motion which gave no hint of the recollection of girlish smiles. Her arms were folded round a five-year-old child which was seated on her lap, and whose weight seemed to drag her down, for she was continually refolding her arms about it, and trying to lift it into a more secure position.

“If ye please, sir, Neddy’s been at it again,” the woman was saying, her lips and chin trembling. “An’ I wad ha’ been here afore ye were up, but as I couldn’t ha’ seen ye it wad ha’ been o’ little use.” Here the speaker’s eyes falling upon the tattered straw hat, which at that moment was being crushed against her bosom, in the wearer’s vain endeavours to turn his head into a position from which he could see Mr. Aschenburg, she exclaimed in an undertone, “Tek off yer hat, Tom. Such manners afore gentlefolk. Tek it off this very minute an’ hold it in yer han’.” Then, lifting up her face, she proceeded in the same tone of voice

which she had used before this interruption. "Neddy's been amang 't hares again, if ye please, Mr. Aschenburg, he hes indeed, sir; an' whatever is to become of us I really can't think."

Here Mrs. Kendal paused, and, turning her head away from Mr. Aschenburg, looked out of one of the windows, the tears slowly gathering in her eyes. She did not wish him to see her crying; she never liked any one to see her crying. She used to tell her troubles sometimes to the tiny babes that were sent to her, when nestling against her bosom, they seemed to ease the stinging sorrow which lay upon her heart. But these were her only confidantes, and as they grew older her lips were closed to them.

But Mr. Aschenburg had seen the face that had been quickly turned away, and his brows contracted slightly, and a flush somewhat deepened the colour upon his cheeks. Then he spoke to the child, keeping up a run of sentences, and holding out his hand and

bidding it come to him and look at the bright new sixpence and the penny which he had found.

The child slowly obeyed, and, slipping off his mother's lap, walked with calm assurance across the floor, his hands behind his back and the brim of his tattered hat clasped closely to him. Standing in front of Mr. Aschenburg, who was stooping in order to bring his face to a nearer level with that of the child, the little fellow took the penny that was held toward him on Mr. Aschenburg's open palm in preference to the sixpence; it was larger, and he knew its value; a sixpence had never been in his possession, and he did not know what it would bring.

"Mek yer bow, Tom. My word, just to think that Mr. Aschenburg wad give ye one of his own pennies." And the woman drew her fingers rakewise over the child's head as it returned with its possession. She had not forgotten her trouble, but it did not render her unmindful of the small courtesies that

lay within her reach. Then, because the tears had been driven back to their source, she began again to speak to Mr. Aschenburg.

“If you remember it was only last back-end that Neddy got into trouble over Sir William’s hares, an’ t’ keepers told far more than they need about him, an’ they made it such a bad job, that t’ magistrates they couldn’t help theirsels, but were obliged to charge Neddy three p’und fifteen shillin’ and sixpence. An’ if ye please sir, Mr. Aschenburg, that took a lot o’ savin’. An’ now Neddy’s gone an’ been doin’ t’ same, only this time it isn’t Sir William’s hares, but it’s yours.” The woman paused, her dull eyes turned away from Mr. Aschenburg’s face and raised to some point in the book-shelves that was far above his head. There was no trembling now in the muscles about the mouth and chin, neither did the tears come into her eyes, but Mr. Aschenburg saw that the toil-worn hands were clasped more tightly round the child, which she had again taken upon her lap.

Again a swift flush of sympathy came into his face, and, finding that the woman made no attempt to enter further into explanations, he asked when her husband had taken the hares, adding that he had heard nothing of it from the keepers.

“Only last night, sir. He brought in two just when I saw t’ first streak o’ daylight past t’ blind. An’ then he gets hissel something to eat, an’ he tells me he’ll be back afore t’ village is well astir. But he hedn’t been gone more than an hour when he comes back all hurried and shakey like, an’ one of his coat-tails torn clean off; an’ he tells me, that when he was sitting beside the gate going into the fields above t’ Devil’s Pot, two o’ your men came up an’ found him, an’ he’d just killed a hare, an’ he’d put it down beside his neckerchief an’ two or three spare snares that he’d got. Then one o’ them laid hold of him an’ there was a deal o’ riving an’ tearing, but once he got hisself twisted loose he soon got away, for Neddy’s lish an’ quicker nor most on his feet.”

“Then what is it you want me to do?”

Here Mr. Aschenburg left the hearthrug and, going toward the nearest window, stood looking at the oak trees that bordered the rising ground of the shrubbery. The leaves had changed their colour to the hue of autumn, and the trees were as resplendent in the morning sunshine as though covered with cloth of gold. Not an insect was to be seen, not a bird moving amongst the branches. Only a leaf would occasionally be loosened and flutter slowly to the ground. Then he turned and faced the woman whose expression of countenance had become yet more distressed.

“I am ready to help you, and will speak on the subject to Mr. Sidney Aschenburg,” he began, as he walked slowly back to the fire. “But if the thing has got abroad, or indeed in any case, I must have it clearly understood by your husband that the hares on the Derthwaite estate belong to Mr. Sidney Aschenburg, in the same way as the nails, leather, hammers,

and lasts in your husband's workshop belong to him."

Mr. Aschenburg found it difficult to say this, and he paused once in order to smash some of the coals upon the fire. He had a chivalrous feeling in his heart toward all women, but a woman in distress had especial claims upon his sympathy.

"All that I mean, if ye please, sir, Mr. Aschenburgh, is this." The woman lifted her weary eyes to his as she spoke. "If ye wad be good enough not to send us afore t' magistrates, but if ye wad just let us pay t' price of t' hares, straight down, just as if ye were a shop; an' then, if ye wad come to Neddy an' tell him, that next time he goes efter them hares ye willn't let him off, ye wad be doin' a rare kindness to me an' my little 'uns. I cannot say, Mr. Aschenburg, 'at I'll ever be able to do anything more than thank ye in return; folks such as us hevn't anything but words."

The speaker looked wistfully up at the man who was standing so gravely upon the hearth-

rug, wondering indistinctly to herself whether he would be able to understand anything of her trouble. But when he turned his face fully upon her, while he made some simple observation upon the wish she had just expressed, all her doubts fled, and a warm glow ran through her frame as she recognized in a dim, untaught fashion, that help lay behind the brief sentences, and sympathy and compassion were plainly expressed upon the face. With a feeling of deep restfulness and satisfaction, a feeling that was usually strange to her, she rose from her chair, and taking the child's battered hat into her own keeping, dropped a curtsy, her narrow stooping shoulders bent even more than usual, and without any further attempt to speak, made her way quickly toward the door.

Mr. Aschenburg stood for several seconds looking at his watch, deliberating in his own mind whether he should go at once to the head gamekeeper, or wait until the man came to state his own views of the shoemaker's

misdeemeanour. For although Sidney had returned that morning to Derthwaite, Mr. Aschenburg knew that a night journey would be a sufficient excuse for the young man to offer for not attending, on that day at least, to any matters of business—he did not know of the many days hard travelling, for Sidney had arrived very early in the morning, and was still resting in his own room.

Mr. Aschenburg glanced from his watch to half a dozen books that were lying open on the table, and several loose sheets of manuscript, and the expression upon his face plainly told which occupation he would have desired. But while he stood hesitating, his books drawing him on the one hand, and the recollection of the weary-looking woman waiting in suspense on the other, a quick step was heard along the corridor outside, and as it came to Mr. Aschenburg's door it made a momentary pause, and then the handle was turned, and in another second Sidney Aschenburg was upon the threshold.

“Hallo, Sidney ; that’s a good fellow. Back at Derthwaite again ?”

“Yes ; back at Derthwaite.” And the young man smiled uneasily.

“Well, come in ; it is not often you honour me with a visit.” And as Mr. Aschenburg spoke he went to take up his old position before the fireplace. Then he continued, in his brisk, cheerful voice, “What kind of a journey have you had ? And how was it that until we received your telegram last night we knew nothing of your coming home ?”

Then Sidney moved out of the shadow of the doorway, and coming up to Mr. Aschenburg, stood with one arm resting on the mantelpiece.

“I came because I wanted to see you.”

The elder man turned with an air of surprise ; but seeing that something was amiss with Sidney, he instantly returned to his old position with his profile toward his companion, while the clear, kindly grey eyes

looked out of one of the windows in a troubled way. The pallid young face, with its haggard and anxious expression, had struck him painfully.

In the early grey light of the morning the idea of telling something of his difficulties to Mr. Aschenburg had come to Sidney like the lifting of his burden on to the shoulders of another. For so curiously was he organized, that the very thought of such a confidence seemed to free him from all future responsibility, and even to place Mr. Aschenburg in the position of sole moving and accountable factor, while he himself would drop by reason of this confidence into a merely passive spectator of the scene. Nor was this sense of freedom and relief jarred upon by any troubled imaginings respecting the way in which this confidence was to be made, and it was not until he found himself in Mr. Aschenburg's presence that the overwhelming difficulties attending such a revelation as he desired to make rose before him.

He moved from his place on the hearthrug, and sitting down in the chair which had been lately occupied by Mrs. Kendal, stretched out his legs with a weary gesture, and clasping his hands behind his head, looked moodily into the fire. Then followed a silence of several minutes, neither of the men speaking nor changing their position; when suddenly, and with an abruptness which betrayed to Mr. Aschenburg that Sidney had, without any attempt at preface, rushed headlong into his subject, the young man said—

“I have come to consult you upon an affair which is considerably harassing me.”

Mr. Aschenburg's eyes came back from the window, and, after a momentary glance at his companion's face, occupied them with a ruck in the hearthrug, which he began to smooth with his foot.

“I am afraid you will tell me I have been an infernal scoundrel.”

“I hope not.” There was a growing gravity of expression in the older man's face; but he

kept his eyes still fixed on the rug, which he was now smoothing mechanically.

“Well, the long and the short of the matter is——” And here Sidney hesitated, not knowing which part of his story to take up. He could not at that moment bring himself to speak of Maggie. He must speak of Frances, and this he did with a harsh, grating tone in his voice. “Is Miss Carter at Derthwaite?”

“Yes; she came yesterday.”

“Then I want to know if you will sanction an engagement between us—if the happiness of winning her love ever falls to my lot?”

A slight flush spread over Mr. Aschenburg’s face. Then he said, with an effort—

“My guardianship is over, Sidney, as you know. I have now no right—neither do I desire to have it—to control you in any way.” Then, as if these words were lacking in sympathy, the speaker added, after a scarcely perceptible pause, “But I am glad to be taken into your confidence and will hear anything you may have to say.”

“I am not altogether sure of the wisdom of such a step.” And here the young man’s hands went up with a nervous manner, and clasped the back of the chair, while he looked up at Mr. Aschenburg with bright, feverish eyes.

“What do you mean, Sidney?”

The young man remained silent for a minute. How could he tell the story of the early summer months? It would be impossible for him to give the exact bearings of the case. No one but himself could ever understand the peculiar fascination which Maggie’s beauty had had for him, and how, week by week, he found himself yet further under its sway, while, at the same time, he was making resolutions again and again to break from it. Mr. Aschenburg would be sure to charge him with heartlessness; and Sidney felt he could not endure this, fresh as he was from struggles in which he had endeavoured to free himself from a purer and more noble love, in order that he might be able to comply with any

demand that could be made upon him by Maggie ; for he still at times deceived himself that it was for this he had left Derthwaite. No ; all he could do would be to allude to his difficulties in general terms.

“I cannot bring a wife here,” he began. “The place is full of unpleasant associations for me.”

Mr. Aschenburg paused for a moment before replying, and then said, “You speak in riddles. I do not understand you.”

“No, I dare say not. I am speaking, as it were, from two points of view, only one of which you see.”

“Do you mean to hint at some entanglement ?” And the elder man looked keenly into the upturned face of his companion.

“The entanglement of a man who has tried vainly to escape falling in love,” replied Sidney evasively. “I went abroad chiefly to get out of Miss Carter’s way.”

“Are you serious in saying that you wished

to avoid her?" And Mr. Aschenburg wore a look of surprise above his gravity.

"I am serious in what I say. I tell you, when I went away it was with the desire of setting a Continent between us."

"And yet you lead me to suppose you love the girl."

"I do love her, God pity me." And the young man sprang from his chair, and began restlessly pacing the room, while the elder one watched him as he walked backward and forward from one window to the other, and from fire-place to door, and finally, like some caged animal, within the narrow space of the table's length.

"Will you listen to a few words of advice, Sidney?" at length began Mr. Aschenburg, the expression upon his face softening into one of forbearance.

"I have come for advice," was the abrupt answer; and Sidney paused in front of the hearthrug.

"You do not tell me much about your love-

story." The speaker laid his hand kindly on the young man's shoulder. "You do not place me in a position to give you personal advice. I can only speak generally, and in such terms as are suitable for every case."

"That is what I wish. General advice is usually more acceptable than personal." But as Sidney spoke, his manner belied his words, and he visibly chafed under the compassionate gaze which met his own.

Mr. Aschenburg ignored this, however, and continued, "If you love any woman, and you have just assured me that you do, strive to make yourself in some degree more worthy of her. Remember that I am speaking to you as I would speak to every other man. I say 'more worthy,' because no man has ever been worthy of the love of a true and noble woman; perhaps no one in this world is worthy of the love which is bestowed upon them." Mr. Aschenburg paused a moment; and then, in a low, urgent tone, while the pressure of his hand upon Sidney's shoulder became heavier,

he continued, "Strive, my boy, to reach that ideal of yourself, which, if you are loved, exists in the mind of the woman you have chosen. Let it be your endeavour to act now and at all times in accordance with it."

Sidney's goaded spirit fretted and chafed under this speech. Had he not made the vain attempt to reach up to that highest place? Had he not during the past few weeks carried on a warfare within himself, doing battle with the love that had lately kindled in his heart, because the woman who had called forth that love had taught him that honour was greater than it? Had he not striven to put away the remembrance of a face, because its exquisite sympathy had awakened in him a tenderness of remorse for that other face, to whose smiles his own would never again respond. The tone of his voice was bitter, therefore, when he answered Mr. Aschenburg.

"Would you strive after that high ideal if it meant that you must renounce the woman you love?"

There was a pause of several seconds before Mr. Aschenburg replied. And then he said, in slow, deliberate tones, "If it should be my unhappiness to love a woman to whom I dare not offer my love—yes."

"Your advice would be hard to follow."

"Possibly. It is not easy always to do what is right."

"And what if I take the lower course?"

"You will be untrue to yourself and the woman you love. That is all."

"Then you are against me proposing to Miss Carter?"

"You have told me too little, Sidney, for me to offer you any personal advice. If you have a deep affection for her, there is no need for me to point out her attractions and good qualities. And whether you are entitled to become a suitor for her hand, it is, alas! not for me to say." The last words were spoken with a touch of acerbity, and Mr. Aschenburg lifted his hand at the same time from Sidney's shoulder.

Several minutes elapsed, and neither man moved nor spoke. At length the silence was broken by the younger one.

“I am sorry I cannot take your advice. I believe it to be both right and best. For although I have talked to you in parables, as it were, I have been able to apply all that you have said to my own case.”

“You have caused me great anxiety, Sidney, by this half confidence.”

“I am very sorry if I have.”

“Could you expect it to be otherwise?” and as Mr. Aschenburg said this, there was something of reproach in his voice.

“I have said much which I never intended to say. But, to confess the truth, I am heavily pressed, and I do not think that at all times I am master of my own words.”

The feverish light died out of Sidney's eyes, and the flush which had burned on his cheeks during the time he had talked with Mr. Aschenburg now faded away, leaving him haggard-looking and worn. A sense of

repose was stealing over him—a dull, dead sense which was more akin to death than life. No longer was any conflict going on within him; he had laid aside all attempts at warfare; he had resolved upon the course that he would take.

“Thank you very much for listening to my half-and-half story.” As Sidney said this, he looked straight into the eyes of the man before him, while a faint smile crossed his face.

“I am afraid I cannot have helped you, Sidney, for I have been working in the dark.” A moisture came over the elder man’s eyes, and again he laid his hand on the young man’s shoulder, adding, “Will you not make a clean breast, Sidney, and tell me all?”

“For myself it seems that I have made a full confession.” Sidney spoke in a low, constrained voice; then, shaking his head sadly, he added, “It would be of no use. I believe when I left Odessa I intended to offer my hand to Miss Carter. I cannot do otherwise;

the love I have for her is eating out my very soul. No one can help me ; I have been a scoundrel, and I must pay the price."

"Not so bad as that, surely." And the elder man looked keenly as he spoke into the weary young face.

"Yes, it is ; it is as bad as that. I am a scoundrel, and not fit to associate with honest men."

Sidney had been turning toward the door as he said the last words, and, having said them, he seemed to fall into a fit of abstraction ; and putting out his hand in an uncertain manner, groped for the handle, and having found it, turned it mechanically, and left Mr. Aschenburg alone.





CHAPTER III.

FACE TO FACE.

LATER the same day Maggie Tindale came across the meadows, and down the narrow strip of broken ground, and so into the path that runs through the wood from Derthwaite to Staneby. She was walking with a joyous heart, and thinking how lucky it was that she had been told by her mother to carry the last set of new-laid eggs to the housekeeper that afternoon ; but for this it might have been late that night, or even the next morning, before she had heard the great good news of Sidney Aschenburg's return.

It is in the nature of youth to be elastic and full of hope, and Maggie's spirits revived,

and her love, if that were possible, quickened toward Sidney with strong belief. Perhaps the time had been long to him as it had been to her, she told herself, even though he were travelling amid the wonders of foreign parts; perhaps he had stayed away from her until the same kind of hunger which she had known during the past weeks had seized him, and had driven him back, in order that he might look upon her face. And Maggie felt so happy and glad that she almost forgot the trouble which was constantly in her thoughts; for it seemed a matter of certainty, now that Sidney had come home, all would be well with her.

Would he be longing to meet her, she wondered? Would he be trying to find a plan by which he could send her a message? What if that very night he went to the quarry, thinking that by some chance she might have heard of his return and believing that she would hasten there to greet him! Oh, she must go. She must

make an excuse when Matthew and her father had finished their tea, and try to get away. They would wonder why she wanted to go out again when she had already had a walk as far as Derthwaite, but that would not matter, for not even Matthew would be likely to guess where she wanted to go—how could he, for Mr. Sidney Aschenburg seemed to have come home unexpectedly, and she was quite sure the news of his return had not yet got to the village. Oh yes, she must go.

And with down-cast eyes and roseate mood she travelled in imagination along the path, which had grown to differ for her from any path that existed or ever could exist. Each pebble that lay on it, each bunch of heather or tuft of grass that grew near it, had power to awaken within her tender memories. It was there, at that point where the path turns that Sidney had first kissed her; she remembered just how the sun had shone that day, and how the sweet smell

of the pine-trees had floated about her. And there, after climbing the breast of the hill till on reaching the torn-up root of the elm where she always paused to take breath, was the place where she had slipped and would have fallen, but for Sidney's outstretched hand, for the path was smooth and slippery in dry weather, so many pine needles being shed upon it. And there! ah, there was the entrance to the quarry, where as she passed along her heart always beat so quickly, and where her breath would come and go as if she had been running, and this because she knew that another minute and she might see Sidney standing beside the group of birch-trees waiting for her: she could even feel the moss under her feet which grew over the old cart road, and which was so soft and deep that it rose above the border of her low country-made shoes.

And a rosy pink like the lining of a sea-shell stole over Maggie's cheeks; and her eyes shone with a soft light. Perhaps that

evening, she was telling herself, perhaps that very evening she might receive a message telling her to come once more to meet him in the quarry wood. Ah, well! and for the first time for many weeks, a smile that was happy and joyous played round her mouth.

Maggie was young, and in youth it is much easier to roll away a cloud of sadness than it is in middle-age. Things must fall out happily, we reason with ourselves; it would be so unjust, so unkind, so altogether out of the natural order of things for the sun to be hidden from us and the sky to be darkened. Laughter-loving creatures, what have we to do with sadness any more than the birds or the flowers or the butterflies.

And so Maggie walked on with the soft light in her eyes, and her lips still smiling.

Every now and again, she stopped to gather a bit of wood-ruff that was rearing its tender green stem through the leaves of an overhanging bramble, or a delicate fernleaf, or a bit of bracken tinged with a golden hue of

autumn. Soon she moved forward again, one hand upon her hip, the other carelessly swinging the basket, her strong frame bent a little forward as she took the rise of the hill; for at this point the fisherman's path makes a sharp ascent only to dip into a broad basin, rising again by slow degrees and then shelving down to the lower ground, where it leads into a public road a few hundred yards to the north of Staneby. At the top of the first ascent she paused, and without any knowledge of the motive by which she was prompted, turned her head and looked up the broken face of the cliff high into the wood, her eyes falling upon an opening in the trees where a patch of sunlight rested.

For one moment her pulses stood still, the next, the blood leaped through her veins and dashed madly back to her heart, and into her ears came a surging sound, which died away almost as suddenly as it came. She stood motionless, her face uplifted with widely

opened eyes, lips of pale purplish colour, and cheeks that had lost the hue of youth. Her heart was now beating slowly, and she was unconscious of the icy coldness which was creeping through her limbs.

She saw Sidney Aschenburg standing hand in hand with a girl, as she and Sidney had stood times without number. But she did not ask herself the meaning of what she saw ; she did not ask what would follow, neither did she connect herself with the scene in any way. She merely watched as one dead to all consciousness of individuality might watch.

But what was happening? The girl had drawn her hand away, and had leapt laughingly over the edge of a projecting piece of rock. . . . Would he follow? Yes, there he came. . . . How noble and beautiful he looked as he took hold of that branch of oak and let himself easily down. . . . But what does that mean? . . . The girl can never be so mad as to think of jumping from the

rock on which she stands to the one at least five feet below her, and which shelves gradually to its outermost edge? Yes, she is. No, he will not let her: his hand is upon her shoulder.

“You must not—Miss Carter—Frances—it is madness, folly, you will lose your footing,” he cries.

But she *has* leapt. And he, what is he doing? What does he mean by stooping and grasping the edge of the plateau? Yes, there he comes; but he has stumbled and fallen, athlete though he is. . . . And she has lighted on her feet! No, the sloping moss-covered rock gives her no hold . . . she has slipt . . . she is sliding over the edge. What is that which she clutches in her hand? A bunch of heather? That will do, that is tough. No, it is the fronds of a fern, and see, it has given way at the roots. . . . There, she has struck her knee against a projecting root, and now she has fallen to one side, and is beginning to roll over and over.

That is right ! Oh, go to her, my darling, my darling. . . . Now, she has stopped : now her dress has caught in the root of the fallen tree. Quick. Oh, well done ; another moment and you will have hold of her. . . . No, her dress has given way, She has broken through. Again she is sliding, slipping. . . . Ah, horrible ! Surely her head struck against that stone in passing. . . . Her hands no longer clutch at the bushes and undergrowth, and her arms toss about and roll under her body as if they are powerless. . . . Oh, quickly, my darling, my darling. Yes, that is right ; leap down the face of that bit of broken rock, it will save time. You have gained on her by half a yard. . . . Quick ! now by the patch of ferns. No, you cannot reach her, she will be at the path in a moment. Yes, she is there ; she has stopped. . . . Oh, sickening ! that tremulous motion and that slight jerking forward of the limbs and body. . . . Go to her, my darling. Yes, that is right, raise her poor head in your arms.

The basket had fallen from Maggie's hand as, with pallid cheeks and eyes starting from their sockets, she stood spell-bound. But when Sidney knelt down beside the prostrate form, and with gentle hands began to lift aside the dishevelled tresses, the consciousness of Maggie's own being gradually came back to her, and the agony of the returning throes of life filled her frame. She began to tremble violently, her breath coming in spasmodic jerks, her hands resting on her chest, and by their pressure striving to relieve its suffocating pain. But when Sidney stooped over the girl's face and touched the white lips with his own, she gave a low cry of anguish, which, however, died and floated away before it could reach Sidney's ears.

Passion and despair took hold of her. The colour came back to her cheeks, her eyes blazed with a fierce light as she knotted and twisted her hands together, pulling them apart and striking them firmly clenched against her limbs. Poor hands, how impotent they were,

and yet how strong. She raised them up to her throat and wound them round its white pillar, while the veins in it were throbbing with a new warmth. Fierce sobs, such as break from wolfish mothers, as they weep over their young, toiled painfully from her bosom, and her feet ground themselves into the soft earth. Why had she lived to see this sight, she asked herself? Why had she not died when her heart was full of pity for the girl as she was falling, and when her heart had cried aloud in trustfulness to its beloved.

Here a fierce joy suddenly took possession of her. Perhaps her rival was dead? Perhaps some of those rocks had played the part of a friend, and their cold hard surface had struck a vital part?

See, he is taking her hands into his own. He is trying to chafe them back into life. . . . Is he feeling the hopelessness of it? Are the hands so cold that no warmth will ever return into them? . . . See, he has laid them down, and now——

She could not look: she could not bear to see those kisses, which, if they told of passionate despair, bore witness also to an intense love. She staggered back from the sight, veiling her face with her hands.

She must get away from the fisherman's path; must get away before Sidney Aschenburg could raise his eyes and see her, where she was standing in an open space with her figure outlined for him against the sky. But there seemed no way, save the retracing of her steps through the wood and meadows, unless she ventured to climb up the steep broken ground, and making a *détour*, come out into the path beyond.

But during the second of time needed for these thoughts to flash through her mind, her eyes had turned once more to the prostrate figure of the girl and of the kneeling one of the man below her; and before she could come to any resolution, she saw Sidney rise from his knees, and going toward the edge of the bank, disappear down the face of the cliff.

Now was her opportunity, she thought, for undoubtedly he had gone for water, and would not return for the space of several minutes.

Swiftly she ran down the path, with trembling limbs, and hands that twisted themselves convulsively in the folds of her dress. And as she came nearer to the place where Frances was lying, her feet stumbled over every slight inequality, and even caught against each other. Her breath was coming quickly, perhaps with running; and her heart beat as though it would choke her. And then, when she came within a yard of Frances, she staggered, and clutching at the air in a vain effort to save herself, fell prone upon the short green turf. But only for an instant did she lie, and with courage and strength suddenly returning, she rose to her knees, her hands within touch of her rival's, and her garments in close proximity to those which the stones and projecting roots of trees had soiled and torn.

The desire to look into the face of this girl whom her lover had kissed, came strongly upon her, and without rising from her knees, she leaned forward, bending over it.

The girl was not dead. That was the first thought which came to her. The lips, though pale, were of a natural colour, and the grey-ness on the cheeks was that of one suffering from exhaustion, rather than the pallor which comes with the first embrace of death. There was a trembling of the eyelids, as a scarcely perceptible wave of colour crept over the cheek.

And as Maggie looked, with bated breath, the thought of the shortness of the time before Sidney would return pressing upon her, Frances gave a shudder from head to foot, and opening her eyes, looked directly into those of the girl whom all-unknowingly she had supplanted.

At first the expression which they wore was one that suggested sightlessness. Then a vague look of consciousness came into them. Then

wonder and inquiry. For a full minute the two looked at each other without word or motion; then Frances, with a deep sigh of weariness, and a puzzled contraction of the brows, turned her head slightly to one side and closed her eyes, as if sight brought thought, and thought in itself was too much for her.

At this moment came the sound of rustling branches; of twigs loosened from the hand and springing back; the occasional falling of a dislodged stone; the scraping of a strong boot upon the face of some projecting rock. Maggie heard it, and, without looking to see whether her tarrying had led to her discovery, rose swiftly and ran up the hill, her steps falling noiselessly upon the moss and short grass.

In the midst of all Maggie's happiness, there had ever lurked a fear, that perhaps some day a "lady," whom she always pictured as fair, tall, and having hair of the same golden hue as Sidney himself, would come toward

her, dressed in long beautiful trailing garments, and having soft white hands, and wearing rings, and perhaps jewels which he had given her round her neck and in her ears. And she would have to step aside for her, and would have to draw back into the shadows. And then Sidney would come and hold out his hand to the beautiful lady, and she would have to watch them going away together, walking perhaps hand in hand, with their faces turned toward each other, their lips smiling, and their eyes bright with the light of gladness; neither of them ever turning round to cast so much as a glance at her, the beautiful lady not knowing that she was hiding there in the darkness, and he forgetful and blinded by the light which shone around the figure at his side.

And now this had come to pass. The lady had come, and stepped between her and Sidney.

No one had told her of his faithlessness. She had seen it for herself.

The sunshine had gone out of the sky for her, and the song of the birds sounded harshly and discordantly as she went with swift step along the path. Her hands were firmly clenched, and hung down closely to her sides ; her face was lifted up and set with a hard stony expression, while her eyes took note of all objects without showing any signs of having observed them. The storm of passionate jealousy which had been so suddenly roused in her, was, with as great a show of swiftness, as suddenly allayed, and but for the dull pain at her heart, she was unconscious of any feeling either physical or mental.

To get home to Matthew, that was the one desire of which she was conscious ; to reach the smithy before it was time for him to leave off working ; to tell him the one thing which alone at that moment seemed to rise to her lips. And then to go up to her little bedroom, and throwing herself upon the bed, draw some warm covering over her, for she was cold—and here Maggie shuddered from head to foot in

the October sunshine—cold even to her heart ;
and, with her face buried in the pillow, weep
out the sobs which, with an iron tension, were
held down within her breast.





CHAPTER IV.

MAGGIE'S RESOLVE.

BEFORE Maggie could reach home, however, the desire to tell Matthew of her new trouble, which had laid hold upon her as the sharp fangs of a spiritual hunger, died down, and she fell into the apathy of despair. What could it signify, she asked herself, whether Matthew knew of this sorrow that had come upon her? No one could do her any good; no one could help her. The beautiful lady had come at last, and had stolen the heart of her lover away. Of what avail could be weeping and clamouring? Love that is once gone cannot be given back again; no one can pass on their love from one to another like

a posy is gathered from a garden. Even she knew that, even Maggie herself. Matthew would pity her ; but even he might give that last touch whereby the rawness of an agony is made to quiver—"Were you not told this before ? Were you not warned ?"

Here Maggie pressed her hands tightly upon her bosom, and the word, which not only in our infancy but in our womanhood is the natural cry of the heart in its hour of direst need, broke from her trembling lips, and "Mother" fell on the stillness of the October air and died away in a piteous sob of half-articulate meaning. Presently she tossed up her arms, and waved them wildly about her head ; and then, because they did not find what they sought, they dropped helplessly to her side. After this she hushed herself as a motherless child will rock itself to sleep in the darkness ; and she forbore to complain aloud, and drove back some of the signs of distress which she knew to be broadly marking themselves upon her face. Then

she walked on quietly until she reached the smithy ; and hearing the ring of two hammers on the anvil, and the sound of her mother's voice in the yard beyond, she knew she could creep up unseen into her room. So, with noiseless tread, she entered the kitchen, and went slowly up the stairs ; then—and oh ! what a haven of rest it seemed—she passed into the silence and grey light of the little bedroom.

She wanted to think, she told herself ; she wanted to try to understand what had happened to her that afternoon. It seemed as though some sudden blow had been dealt at the very root of her being ; she felt paralyzed, as if one half of her—the half which lay in the past—were dead, and that which belonged to the present were all that could be said to be alive. It seemed ages since she had been clasped in the arms of the man she loved. But it was another self which he had petted and fondled, that quiet self that was lying with closed eyes beneath a

shroud. And she wondered if she would cry or fret, and if her cheeks would grow worn and pale.

The simple thought roused her. She sat upright on the edge of the little bed, and took a deep breath as though to gather up her strength. She knew what she would do. There must be no sighing, no weeping, for these things would tell a tale against her. And if any one marked the listlessness of her movements, the growing whiteness of her face, she must say the hot summer had tried her, or the autumn was an unhealthy season, the most sickly in the year.

Maggie was right. Women have many excuses for their languors: the sunshine has been too warm; the nipping frosts of winter have chilled them; they are tired, or they have a headache; and surely these are better and braver things of which to complain than to whine and fret and fume about the sorrows which can in no way be alleviated. Much better say one of these things than add to the

burden of others by complaining that their wings are broken, and that they can only flutter along the ground through all the coming years.

“Yes, she would keep her sorrow all to herself. She would tell no one; not Matthew—not even her mother. And then the dread which had been ever present with her of late, but which somehow momentarily had been forgotten in the sharp pain of this latest blow, here started up into existence again. And with it came one of those wild, vain, and futile hopes, which hovers as a light over the waste lands of despair.

A new set of emotions swept themselves wave-like across her soul—only an untutored village girl, unable to express them by defined thoughts, but yet, through the purity of her womanhood, capable of assimilating them into her nature, and becoming nobler by reason of the whiteness of their light; evanescent and vague emotions, as fragile as the bubble floating on the summer breeze; sweet, delicious hopes of motherhood; yearnings toward the

little life that was coming to her from out the darkness. And then came the imaginings of baby smiles and baby kisses, and the touches of little waxen hands, which would waken sweetest harmonies of love. And the new emotions took in the remembrance of the man she loved, and wound him and herself together with that baby life into a threefold unity, and she asked herself how far might it not be possible he could share with her the tremulous dawning of this new-found joy. Surely he, too, would stretch forth his hands toward it with strong yearning? Surely he, too, would find a space suddenly cleaved for it in his heart. And once more in imagination she heard the voice of the man she loved sounding in her ears, and felt his arms folded round her, his kisses upon her lips. Oh yes, she told herself, there was hope that he would love her again when he knew of this; the fancy for the beautiful lady would be forgotten, and she would find him to be still her own true love.

Presently came a sharp revulsion of feeling, and Maggie started up from the edge of the bed, and with hands clutched tightly, walked for the space of a yard or two, and then stopped, while her heels ground themselves into the floor. What had she to do with such thoughts, she asked herself bitterly? Henceforth for her there could be only heartburnings and shame. Motherhood was only meant for those who were sheltered by a name, a home and love.

Slowly through this revulsion grew one thought, one desire, that she should see Sidney Aschenburg, and make known to him the coming possibility of shame, and if it might be, win back his love. Ah! that would indeed be like the sudden breaking of a dawn! Surely it was only due to him to make known her wants; to tell him that a time of need had come. Could he refuse what she would ask? Could he deny her the protection of his name and the shelter of his love. Impossible. She would seek him out, she would

go to him, even if she had to pass into that, to her, enchanted land, even into the glamour-surrounded world of Derthwaite.

But the trifling actions of everyday life must have their place, even if some cataclysm has overthrown the hidden foundations of life. So Maggie smoothed her hair, and straightened the collar that had got awry, and with slow and heavy footstep went downstairs, and seeing that the kettle was already boiling, began to make preparations for setting out the little table in front of the fire for tea. Heads may ache and hands may tremble, but tea must be made and bread and butter cut, though hearts are breaking.





CHAPTER V.

A SCENE IN MRS. ASCHENBURG'S BOUDOIR.

THE sun was shining brightly into the curious old-fashioned room, upon the rose-wood chairs faded to a snuffy brown, upon the cream-coloured walls with their faded decorations of peacocks as large as life, and trailing boughs of roses and vines; upon the cream-coloured curtains with their border of milk-maids and shepherds; upon the carpet, which was covered with a scroll-work, amongst which gambolled birds, squirrels, and monkeys, having at each corner a grotesque figure that was meant to represent Pan. There were several spindle-leg rose-wood cabinets, with glass fronts and shelves filled with egg-shell

china; a square piano inlaid with ivory, which had belonged to Mrs. Aschenburg's mother; and a deep old-fashioned couch with straight back and ends, covered with the chintz that pictured the maids and shepherds keeping holiday. A high but narrow mirror hung above the mantle-shelf, the tooth and egg pattern carefully picked out in black upon the framework whose once brightly shining gold was now dulled by age. Chelsea vases that were also high and narrow, stood upon the shelf with peacock feathers arranged in prim fashion in each. Upon the piano were three large blue Worcester bowls filled with dried rose-leaves: the scent of these filled the room.

It was the day after the accident in the quarry wood, and Frances sat in the shadow thrown by one of the cream-coloured curtains, her cheeks pale and her hands listlessly crossed in her lap, while Mrs. Aschenburg, with bent head and fingers that were occupied in slow and deliberate movements upon some crochet-

work, sat in the broad patch of sunlight that ran slant-wise past the curtain and across the room.

"I feel much better and stronger this afternoon," remarked Frances, after a prolonged pause.

"You feel better?" and Mrs. Aschenburg lifted up her dignified head and eyelids.

"Yes, much better," continued the girl slowly. "My head still aches a little, and my limbs are stiff and sore. But I do not think there is anything to prevent me going downstairs."

"Are you finding it dull?"

"Oh no, thank you very much;" as she spoke a slight flush suffused her face. Then, after a moment's hesitation, she added, "I think I feel almost strong enough to thank Mr. Sidney Aschenburg for the kind way in which he helped me home after my fall."

"I have no doubt Sidney would be glad to see you. He has inquired many times after you this morning."

“Then some time when you are downstairs, if you should happen to see him anywhere——”

“Certainly. I will send for him now if you like.”

This was what Mrs. Aschenburg wanted, and she put out her hand toward the bell, and then, as if upon some second thought, she withdrew it, and leisurely folding up her work, remarked that she would go herself to tell Sidney as she had some orders for the housekeeper. The putting out of her hand toward the bell was a feint, and the orders to the housekeeper were mythical; but Mrs. Aschenburg was a diplomatist, who desired to obtain a few minutes' *tête-à-tête* between this girl and her son.

So soon as Mrs. Aschenburg left the room, Frances got up from her chair, and still in the shadow of the lowered curtain, stood with her hands clasped nervously and her eyes fixed upon the roses, vines, and the peacocks which craned their necks toward each other on the

opposite wall. She looked like some delicate white flower that had been roughly tossed by the wind, as she stood there in her clinging soft white gown. There was a bruise on the temple and on the side of her face, which had come into contact with the projecting piece of rock ; and dark lines were beneath her eyes, and an excessive pallor told of the headache, weariness, and general shock to the system which she had sustained. Her hands were trembling, and the folds of white serge upon her bosom rose and fell quickly ; and though her eyes were fixed on the opposite wall, she did not see the faded hues of the peacock's plumage, nor the dull red of the roses, nor the brown hue of the leaves. She was listening, all her faculties absorbed for the first faint sound of a footstep in the corridor beyond.

After a time a light broke into her eyes, her head drooped slightly, and a smile came to her lips. She was standing as one under a spell.

The sound became louder, and the door was

opened quickly, and he whom she awaited came into the room.

But she could not look up, could only stand with down-cast eyes and mute lips. In another instant she was conscious that her hands were being held between two strong palms, and that there was a confused sound of words beating about her ears.

“I have been very anxious about you—very anxious all last night,” were the words that she caught at length. And then she drew her hands away from those that held them, and stepping back a little, rested her shoulders as if for support against the mantelpiece.

“I think you ought to sit down; you look tired and weak.” Sidney spoke gently, and put his hand on the arm of a chair as if to move it toward her.

“No, thank you. Let me stand for a little while. I want to thank you for the kindness you showed me after my wilfulness; I do not know what I should have done if you had not been there to help me home.”

“Do not speak in that way. It was a great delight to me to help you.” As he said this, Sidney hesitated awkwardly.

A log of wood that was burning on the hearth here rolled over upon its own white ashes, and sent a shower of sparks up the chimney, causing Frances to spring hastily from the mantelpiece and clutch, with the nervousness of an invalid, at the arm of her companion. With almost as great haste she loosened her hold, blushing, and giving a swift deprecating glance at Sidney.

“How foolish,” she exclaimed.

“Foolish to come to me for protection?”

“No ; to be so startled.”

There was a pause of a few minutes, and Sidney turned his eyes from the pale face before him to the fire, which, after sending up that one shower of sparks, was now smouldering with a narrow line of glowing wood between the white ashes and the log. He was looking as he had looked on the previous afternoon when he told Frances of his love.

A slight flush of joy and excitement was upon his face ; the tension of the muscles round his eyes and mouth was relaxed, while the falling in of the temples and the slight, but yet painful contraction of the brows, told of a highly wrought emotional frame. It was evident he was meditating upon some question that was in his mind. Turning suddenly, as if he had no patience to work out or wait for an answer, he said—

“Will you complete that half-promise to me? I can wait ever so long for you—can wait patiently. If a man has hope he can wait very patiently.”

Again Frances moved back an inch or two, her shoulders once more seeking support from the mantelpiece, while her expression and attitude showed how disturbed she was. Slowly, very slowly, she drew herself up, and with an uncertain motion as of one suffering from great bodily weakness, she drew a little nearer her lover, lifting her hands toward him and looking up at the

same time, a faint colour sweeping over her face, and a look of intense joy shining in her eyes.

Was it the exquisite sympathy of her face, the loveliness of the soft grey eyes that were lifted up to his, the tender graciousness of her lips that sent that visible quiver through his frame? Or was it the remembrance of another face, floating with the indistinctness of the thin grey mists of evening, that had come between this one and his own?

“My darling!” he exclaimed hoarsely, and for one moment the room reeled with him, and he was unconscious of everything—unconscious even of the touch of the soft fingers that blindly and half instinctively he had taken within his own.

“My only fear is that you have imagined me to be much better than I am.” It was Frances who spoke, and her tone was very earnest.

“No, I have not.” And Sidney clutched her hands, speaking eagerly and huskily.

“Do not set me on a pedestal.” And the sweet eyes fell, while tears and smiles struggled for supremacy.

“You do not understand.” And Sidney took a deep breath, and strove to steady his voice. “We men are full of infirmities; but if we can love a woman to the point of adoration, if it be but once in our lives, we are the better for it. I have to learn what *your* love for me can do—but I know something of the power of what my love for you has worked upon my life.” And here the more self-possessed tones of the speaker suddenly broke, and he added, in a voice of bitterness, almost of despair, “God knows if I let it work upon me fully it would make a true and noble man of me; as it is, I deliberately choose the lower part.”

What mysterious words! And the girl, full of sympathy for what she saw was some crying need, drew closer to him; and this time, freeing both her hands, placed them high upon his shoulders, and with head thrown

back, and eyes glittering with tears, began her words of comfort.

“Sidney, dear Sidney”—her voice was soft as that of a mother to her sick child—“it grieves me to hear you speaking against yourself. I do not want you altered; I want you just as you are. If you were something else you would be another Sidney, not the Sidney whom I love.”

As she spoke, his arms were gradually folded round her, while his head hung over her as though she were in truth a divinity, before whose shrine he reverently bowed.

“You must not say anything against yourself, because it is you yourself I love.” And here one of the speaker’s hands went up to the hair, which was being burnished by a ray of sunshine.

“Frances, do you think you can love me always? Do you think that if in the future”—here the stooping face worked strongly with emotion, as the speaker thought of the possible nearness of the events of which he thus

vaguely spoke—"I mean, if in the future you find that follies and sins are attributed to me, do you think it would change your love?"

"No, Sidney; if you loved me, I think it would only bring you closer."

Here the slight form was drawn passionately within the enfolding arms, and the pale face flushed beneath the kisses which it received.

"Tell me," Sidney whispered—"tell me, my darling, that you will believe in me always. Promise me that through good report and ill report I shall have your trust."

"I promise you, Sidney."

"And if—if in the time to come there is no one to speak for me, no one to excuse me, no one to say 'He meant well,' will you stand up for me as though I had been your husband?"

"Sidney, what do you mean?" And the speaker lifted her head from its resting-place, and looked up at him with a frightened expression.

"I do not know what I mean," was the hurried answer; and Sidney looked with a

distressed expression away from her face and through the window, where the distant hills bordered the landscape with a broken and faint grey line. Then turning his head again, he said, with forced composure, "I have felt oppressed lately. Sometimes I fancy a serious illness is hanging over me; sometimes I think it is the *triste* feeling which autumn brings. And then again I think it is because I have been a good deal harassed—you see, I have been very much in love." Here he paused, and playfully kissed the forehead that was within his reach.

"Foolish Sidney!" And Frances gave a low, tender laugh. "And now I must sit down and rest a little. I promised Mrs. Aschenburg I would wait very quietly till she came."

The girl's arms dropped from her lover as she said this, and gently releasing herself, she stepped back a couple of paces from him.

"Will you be well enough to dine with us to-night?"

“Mrs. Aschenburg does not seem to wish it, so I shall stay upstairs.”

“Then I shall not see you again to-day?”

“I think not.”

“And am I to go without a ‘good-bye?’”

“Oh no.” And smilingly and half coquetishly Frances held out the tips of her fingers to Sidney, the willowy, graceful figure thrown slightly forward, as with her left hand she held back the sweeping folds of her gown.

“And is this to be all, my Lady Disdain?” Something of the old expression of boyish happiness came into Sidney’s face.

“You can come and see me to-morrow, if that is what you mean.”

“Ah, but I shall claim a ‘good-bye’ to-morrow, just as I do to-day.”

“You are nonsensical.”

“Not when sleep rounds our little life of to-day.”

“What do you mean?”

That each day is a life; and so, because I shall not see you again in the little life

of to-day, I think I should have a 'good-bye.' ”

“ But each to-morrow brings the resurrection of the life of to-day.”

“ Not always, my darling.”

She was still smiling, still dallying with him ; then, seeing the slight gravity which had come into his manner with the last words, she yielded.

“ And now I must see you seated in your chair before I leave you. Yes, that is right ; lean back, and let me put this cushion where you can rest your head.” And then he kissed her on the forehead, and turned to go.

For years after Frances could picture him as she saw him that afternoon, when, pausing on the threshold, with one hand holding the door ajar, he turned to smile. The sunshine lay about his feet, but the shadow from the curtain, which was still partly drawn across the window, fell upon his face and upon the sombre background of the old rose-wood

cabinet, with its formal array of cups and saucers, and on the cream-coloured walls with its peacocks and roses and vines.

He seemed to have drawn out of the sunshine into the shadows. Nevertheless, a peaceful expression lay in his eyes, his brow was tranquil, and the lines of his mouth, as they showed beneath the slight moustache, were calm and satisfied.

“Good-bye,” he said, and the tone of his voice betrayed deep and intense happiness. “Good-bye, until the life of this little day is finished. Good-bye, my darling, good-bye, and God grant that we may meet again to-morrow.”

Another smile, another wave of the hand, and the figure, with its bearing full of grace and courtesy, passed out of her sight.

As a man in a dream, so did he walk along the corridor, his eyes lowered to the ground, his head stooping a little ; down the principal staircase, and into the oak-panelled passage

out of which the room, which was half studio, half museum, opened ; his mind filled as with the melody of a song that had been sweetly sung.

The rustling of a print dress, and the sound of light pattering steps were unheard by him ; and when Abel, his mother's old servant, laid her hand upon his arm in order to detain him, he started as a man who is suddenly awakened out of sleep.

“There is some one wanting to see you, Master Sidney, at the side door.” The sweet old face, with its full bordered white muslin cap, and bows and ends tucked under the chin, was lifted up to the young man, and the dim eyes were strained to see into his face. “I told her she should have come to the kitchen door, for nobody but you and Mr. Aschenburg ever came in by the side door. But all the family are very proud. She did say something about its being because she wanted to see you that had made her come there, and that she was shy of coming to the kitchen, where

there are so many servants. But then, deary me, she might have knocked there long enough; it was just by chance I was going past and heard her."

"Who is it, Abel?" asked Sidney, his pulses standing still for a moment, to rebound throbbing wildly the next instant.

"It's Maggie Tindale, Jonathan Tindale's daughter."

"Maggie Tindale!"

"Yes. She seems to be in trouble. I asked her if she would give me a message—but what is it Master Sidney?" The tiny old woman laid a hand tenderly upon the young man's arm, and strove by quick movements of her eyelids to clear away the mist of years.

"Nothing, Abel, nothing—some iron-work—I remember what it is. Matthew is patching up a broken shield for me." And Sidney put his hand distractedly over his forehead. Then, remembering that the old nurse was still looking up at him, he added, "I cannot

see her at the door—I know exactly what she has come about—it certainly will be that shield; Matthew has evidently not understood my written directions—yes, I had better see her, Abel. Show her in here;” and he moved toward the door of the studio as he spoke. “It will not detain me a minute—unless of course I have to make a sketch marking where the plates have to be fastened on—but you need not wait. Just show her in, Abel, and I dare say the girl will easily find her own way out.”

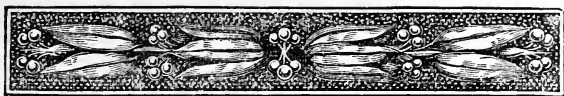
The old nurse looked perplexed, and shading her eyes with her hand, watched her young master, as, having left the door ajar, she saw him lift the curtain which hung across it, and after stooping and passing beneath it, instantly let fall its heavy folds.

“That boy of mine,” she muttered softly to herself, “is full of uneasy wayses.” Then as if a word of praise were necessary, she immediately added, “But it is just by a very little that he has missed being full

of goodness. He'll come all right if they give him time."

So saying she went back to where she had left Maggie Tindale standing within the shadow of the side door.





CHAPTER VI.

MAGGIE AT DERTHWAITE.

THE afternoon sun was carefully shut out of the room into which Sidney Aschenburg stepped. The crimson curtains that hung across the centre of the apartment, were hardly distinguishable from the deep shadows, where they were looped up at either side against the wall. The open piano, the easels with their burdens of unfinished pictures, the carved chairs with their faded tapestry seats and backs, all stood in sombre shadow ; while the mass of furniture that was pushed in confused disorder against the walls that a clear space might be left down the middle of the room, showed only here and there a

gleaming surface of wood or inlaid brass, the outline and the rich patches of colouring, lost in the prevailing gloom.

Sidney walked down this open space, and pushing aside the window hangings at the further end of the room, let in the sunlight upon the heavy book-cases, the cabinet and curios, and the shelf with its collection of Indian brass-work that the shadows had turned to a dull red gold. Then he turned round and stood waiting upon the hearthrug for the entrance for his visitor.

The flush of joy had left his face, and the brightness that shone in his eyes was no longer due to happiness but to suddenly kindled anger, that Maggie should have dared to seek him in his home. His hands were thrust into his coat pockets, his head held erect in expectancy. His face was very pale, and there was a nervous twitching in one side: and his nostrils were distended as though he were breathing hard, while his eyes were fixed upon the curtain which hung

over the door. A few minutes after he had taken up his position on the hearthrug, he saw it lifted and a tall woman's form stoop to pass beneath it into the room, and his brows contracted suddenly as if from intense pain. But he did not speak; not even when the sound of the closing door told him that he and his visitor were alone.

Maggie paused just beyond the threshold, dizzy with conflicting emotions, her hands folded tightly against her bosom, her pale beautiful face uplifted while she looked with an appealing expression toward Sidney Aschenburg. For several seconds she remained motionless; then, slowly and indistinctly the remembrance came to her of the errand which had brought her to Derthwaite, and she moved several paces further down the room, until coming beneath the looped-up curtains, she paused once more, the expression in her eyes changing to one of tenderness.

"If you please, sir, I have come," she began, vainly endeavouring to control the trembling

of her voice—"I have come because I did not think you would ever be at the quarry again, and because I knew you would not care to see me at my father's house." A sense of suffocation in her chest and throat compelled her to pause.

"Why did you come here?" Sidney's voice was hard and metallic, and he gave a short cough, as if to clear away some obstruction in his throat.

Maggie had buoyed herself up with the hope that at least he would greet her kindly, perhaps even tenderly, and that this meeting, when once its painfulness was over, would be one of explanation and reunion. But when he did not put out his hand to take hers, nor exchange the common courtesies of greeting, and when she saw distinctly the expression upon his face, she knew her fate. There was no frown, no look of scorn, simply a cold, repellant gaze, strong and self-sufficient, which fell upon her like the stroke of death. Then the jealousy that was lying dormant, stirred within

her, and rose like an imprisoned storm to her lips.

“I came because I wanted to see you,” she cried fiercely. “I came here because I was not ashamed of seeking you out, Mr. Sidney Aschenburg, before the servants, nor before your mother, who would spurn me like a dog if she knew what I have been to you.”

“You had no right to follow me to my door. Have I not told you many a time that if ever you wanted me, you were to wait for me in the lanes, or write to me—anything rather than come to Derthwaite?” The tone of the speaker’s voice was still metallic, but there was a thrill of anger in it.

“Yes, a month ago, a day even, I would have written. But now things are different between us.” The speaker had overcome the sense of suffocation, and was gradually breaking out into a wild kind of eloquence. “A week ago I believed all your promises to me. I believed, although you had gone away from Derthwaite without a word, without even try-

ing to say good-bye, that some day you would come back to me, and that we should meet each other and love each other still the same. But now I know that a lady has come between me and you, and that whenever you listen to her voice, it will be like hearing such music as puts away all other sounds of earth, and that when you look into her face you will forget everything, even the God that made you."

"Our meetings could not go on for ever. This you must surely have known."

There was a momentary pause, and the girl's face lost something of its wildly passionate expression. Then she continued—

"Sometimes of a night, when I was lying awake in my bed, I had troubled thoughts about a day that never rightly seemed near at hand, a day that was always far off and misty like, when a beautiful lady with shining hair and delicate hands would come into my place and steal away all your love. But it only seemed like a dream; I used to

think about it, but I never believed it would really come."

For the first time since Maggie's entrance, Sidney moved uneasily, shifting his weight from one foot to another. Even at that moment he was conscious of the bitter mockery of his position ; and, fresh from the kisses of the girl he loved, he rebelled against the pleadings of the one whom he had betrayed.

Then Maggie, twisting her hands one within the other, and wringing them as though she would restrain their blind motions of supplication toward him, broke suddenly into wild, disjointed sentences.

"What is it?" she cried. "I do not understand. Oh, say it is all a mistake—that I have been mad—that I am wicked to come to tell you that you have forgotten me."

Two perpendicular lines cut deeply into Sidney's forehead, and divided the contracting eyebrows, while an ashen grey colour settled round his mouth. But he did not move from the place where he stood, neither did he take

his hands from his pockets in order to meet those which were twisting themselves in dumb agony.

“Maggie, I regret the past,” he said coldly. “God knows that I have scarcely rested night nor day since——” He was going to say since the day that the idea had first suggested itself that his love for another woman might possibly compel him to desert her, when, becoming conscious of its unseemliness, he broke off abruptly. “Call me by any hard name you choose. Say that I am a scoundrel, say that I should be hounded out of the place.”

“I do not understand,” and there was a beseeching entreaty in Maggie’s voice. “Tell me, sir, tell me plainly what has come between us.”

“Maggie, why did you come here! Of what use can such a scene as this be?” He was harassed beyond endurance, and spoke again with anger. “I have told you often enough—I have hinted it at any rate, if I have not told you plainly—that everything

would sooner or later have to come to an end between us. Well, all I can say is, that everything has come to an end, and the sooner we both forget the past the better."

The woman's magnificent form cowered down in the attitude of a creature that flinches from a mortal blow. And then Maggie began to strike out with her arms and stagger helplessly forward ; not, however, as if she wished to lessen the space between herself and Sidney Aschenburg, but rather as if she were seeking for some support. Sidney went hastily to her, and throwing one arm round her, half carried, half supported her to a chair.

" Why did you come ? " Sidney spoke bitterly and harshly.

Why indeed had she come ! The words steadied her reeling senses, and she was able to look fixedly, if with a terrified expression at Sidney, who now stood a couple of paces in front of her. She was struggling with a sudden fear against a numb feeling that was stealing over her limbs, a dreary kind of

languor which threatened to climb up to her brain. Was it death? she asked herself. Had the end indeed come, and was this ebbing away of all strength the ebbing away of life? She must rouse herself, she must fight against this icy coldness which was creeping over her. She wanted to live; she wanted to make her last claim whereby she yet hoped to regain his love; she wanted to see a smile upon his face, wanted to see him bending over her with the compassion that belonged to the days whose tenderness yet lay like an autumn stillness on her soul.

Collecting all her strength therefore, her arms resting on those of the chair on which she was seated, her head drooping forward, she broke out abruptly with the words—

“I did not come to vex you, sir. I am broken-hearted, but not angry. I do not even want to know if it were true what I saw above the Devil’s Pot.”

Sidney started and half turned away, to turn, however, hastily back again and fix his

eyes upon the face, which, as the girl proceeded to tell him that story, the recital of which yet filled her with hope, was covered with one sweeping glow of colour and then paled again, but which never drooped to avoid his gaze.

When she had finished, he asked in a hoarse voice what she wanted from him, stepping away as if to widen the space between them, his face haggard, his thin nostrils losing their delicacy of form, his cheeks sunken, and his chin narrowed and sharpened. He stood confused, as one who has not fully comprehended all that has been said to him.

“Sir, can you not be true to me and love me still?”

But the words rang only as phantom sounds on his ears, and he made no reply.

“Oh, sir, Mr. Aschenburg—I will serve you well; I will be your servant, your slave.” The girl rose from her chair, and with arms stretched out to him, pleaded with a wild untaught eloquence of attitude and word.

“I will love you and be as true a wife to you as any lady in the land. I will watch your ways that I may not shame you. I will give up my whole life to you. Oh, sir ; if you will let me love you, if you will let me hear your voice and sit and watch you—I do not even ask that you will speak to me—it would be enough, I would be your most true, your most loving servant.”

A fierce conflict was going on within Sidney Aschenburg. Remorse, pointing to the stern duty of taking this girl under his protection, and acknowledging and accepting her relationship to him before the world ; passionate adoration for another, that but a short time ago had received such rich tokens of acceptance, crying out to him in its own strength and loveliness, of its right to live ; agonizing compassion toward the girl whom he had ruined, and a tenderness that had risen up within him, and which now clung pityingly to the object of its dead love.

He looked at the noble figure of the girl

before him ; he searched keenly and swiftly the lineaments of her face ; he marked her expression changing from despair to hope, and from hope to despair ; he observed the quivering eager poise of her head and shoulders as she leaned toward him ; he heard her voice strung to its high key with the intensity of her emotion. For several seconds he stood thus, and then, unable, to bear the sight, he turned his head away, and his eyes wandered in a distracted look over the room.

“ Oh, sir ; those long happy days can still come back to us. I would do everything for you—I would live for you, die for you.” The chill numbness was being conquered, and a momentary gleam of hope taking possession of her, the blood mounted to her cheek, and she stood before him in all the magnificence of her beauty.

Slowly did he turn again toward her.

“ Maggie, you scarcely know what you are asking from me,” he began in a hoarse tone, but was interrupted by her.

"I only ask that you will let me be your wife. I ask nothing else from you—nothing."

"I do not think you understand the meaning of your words," he continued, as though she had not broken in upon him. "You are asking me to give my whole life up to you. Surely that is a tremendous atonement."

"Your whole life," she repeated vaguely.

"Yes, my life; or at all events all that would be worth calling life to me."

"You used to love me." These words were said in a low tone, but not despairingly, more as though she would urge upon him the possibility of his loving again. The speaker in her eagerness had moved a little nearer to him, coming from beneath the shadow of the crimson curtains into the quickly fading light of the afternoon.

"That is my fault. I used to love you." The tone in which Sidney spoke was bitter, and he swept his clenched hand in front of him as though pushing aside an impalpable foe.

“You *used* to love me! Then you do not love me—not now, not now.” And with the cry as of a wounded animal Maggie clasped her hands over her eyes.

“Maggie, I cannot endure this. It is agony to me and to yourself.” Sidney made an involuntary movement toward her, which, however, he instantly checked, for what right had he now to lay so much as his hand upon hers.

“Then you will not marry me, will not help me in my misery and shame.”

“I will help you. I will do all that I can for you.”

“You cannot help me.”

“Yes, Maggie, I can.” And this time as the hands slipped down from the girl’s face, Sidney caught them in his own.

“I tell you, you cannot,” and the speaker wrenched her hands from those which would have held them. “I want to be made as good as yourself, and you will not. I want to have your love, and you will not give it.

Do not say that you can help me, it is just as if you were lyin' to my face."

"Tell me, Maggie, that you forgive me. Tell me that you will try to think leniently of my faults for the sake of what has passed between us? I know that there must be much bitterness in your heart for me, and rightly so; but I cannot let you go without some assurance that in the future you will endeavour to think kindly of me."

"I want nothing with you," was the passionate answer. "I don't want to forgive you. You taught me to love you, and you have been my ruin."

"Maggie, I will help you. I will do all I can for you."

"Help!" The speaker drew herself up to her full height, and her eyes blazed with scorn. "Help, did you say? or didn't I hear the word rightly? Help! What do you mean by help? You would toss me gold, I suppose—gold! as if I had been one of those poor things you would cry shame on me very likely

if I were to mention. No, Mr. Sidney Aschenburg, I will not have your gold. What I gave, I gave from love—you, *you*,” and the girl’s lips curled, and the words hissed from her lips—“you took it because you were a gentleman, a craven-hearted gentleman. No, Mr. Sidney Aschenburg, I won’t take your gold.”

“Maggie!”

“I’ll hear no more,” was the passionate interruption.

“But you shall hear me. I too have a right to speak. To-morrow you will be calmer, and if you will come in the afternoon to our old place of meeting——”

“Meet you again!” And Maggie burst into a loud laugh. “Meet you, and hear you tell of your beautiful lady. No, no, Mr. Sidney Aschenburg.”

“I shall be there at the old time.” Sidney’s voice was trembling, and heavy drops of sweat clung about his face, which was of an ashen hue.

“Take *her* there, and tell her of the kisses you used to give *me*.”

“Maggie, neither of us just now is fit to speak to the other.”

“You are quite right, we are not fit to speak to each other. I am ruined, and you are still a gentleman, with everybody bowing down and courting you.”

“You must go away, Maggie.” And Sidney stepped past her, going toward the door and lifting the curtain which hung across it.

“Yes, I must go, because you have tired of me—tired of me, Mr. Sidney Aschenburg.” She had followed him slowly, and now stood with her eyes flashing, her cheeks blazing with colour. “You take everything from us—and then you say, you—may—go.”

Sidney pulled the curtain back with a sharp rattle; and on his opening the door, Maggie stepped past him, as a queen might have done, into the passage.

The afternoon sun had faded slowly out of

the cream-coloured boudoir, and Frances stood in the twilight idly dallying. She had been alone for some time, and had turned over the few books which the room contained, but finding nothing that pleased her fancy, had taken to roving about and lifting up first one ornament then another, looking at each abstractedly, and then returning it to its place. At length she determined to go down to the library, and there find some book over which she could sink into that state of reverie which has its beginning half in the book we read, half in the condition of our own life.

She was surprised to find how weak and languid, how stiff and tired she was, when she came to walk the length of the long corridor which led to the top of the principal staircase, and then down that staircase, shallow though were its black oak steps. Again the hall seemed a broad space to traverse, and the panelled oak passage of an almost interminable length; she wondered she had never before noticed it, and the distance to the library door from the archway in the hall.

At last, however, it was reached, and she sank down half exhausted upon a chair. How stupid, she said to herself, to have so little strength, just because she had fallen down a rough bit of ground in a wood. But only for a moment did she rest, the energy of her character asserting itself, and going to the bookshelves where she knew some of her favourite poets were to be found, she took out a volume, smiling to herself as a vague dream floated over her of the rapturous *dolce far niente* of thought which would come; for Frances was in love, and there are moods of love to which books may be found that will set themselves as an accompaniment of softest music.

Still smiling, and with the volume held between her two hands, she went out of the door which had been left ajar. What would Mrs. Aschenburg say to her when she heard that she had been so adventurous, and had made an excursion which had taken her almost the whole round of the house? Frances

smiled as she asked herself this question, not from any feeling of mischief but from pure gladness of heart.

Ah, there was Mr. Sidney Aschenburg's door opening, and some one coming out. A woman's figure; that was easy to discern, although the twilight was deepening. It must be Mrs. Aschenburg. And here a rippling laugh broke from Frances as she thought of the astonishment her unexpected appearance would cause.

The sound of that laugh reached the woman who, in a passion of outraged love had but that moment left Sidney Aschenburg, and she turned round swiftly and faced the girl who was coming toward her.

Who could it be? Frances wonderingly asked herself. A farmer's daughter, a villager? And the space between them becoming lessened, these speculations gave way to definite thoughts. How beautiful, how magnificent-looking she was! But in what a strange state of excitement, and how fiercely did she meet her gaze

Frances began to tremble a little, and wish that she were past her.

The rippling laugh that had broken upon the silence of the oak passage seemed to Maggie one of derision. Who was this who could mock at her misery? Who was this who could break a jest upon her heart? And then, when Frances came nearer and she recognized the girl whom she knew to be her rival, her whole being rose up in a passion that could not be controlled, and the fierce desire seized her to blast the happiness which had wrecked her own. And so, without waiting till Frances came to the place where she was standing, she stepped forward and planted herself in the centre of the passage, and a couple of paces from the spot on which Frances had paused, saying, in a voice hoarse with passion—

“Do you know that the kisses you had yesterday from him were mine by right? Mine, I tell you—mine. No one but I can stand up without shame and receive kisses from his lips.”

Frances, weakened and unnerved by her fall, shrank before the voice rather than the words of which she scarcely took in the import, and her cheeks blanched.

“He loved me before he loved you,” continued the impassioned voice. “Ask him how many times he has taken me in his arms and kissed me. Ask him for some of the pretty names he gave me long before you came to Derthwaite. He will answer you, I dare say; he will be proud to tell you of my shame.”

Frances trembled in every limb, an undefined dread seizing her as the incoherent words started up as a revelation, and supplied the key which had ever been wanting to the occasionally strange words and moods of Sidney Aschenburg. Once she tried to speak, but her lips failed, and the sound of her voice died away.

“It is because you are a lady that you have been able to take his heart from me. I haven’t fine ways like you; I don’t know how

to say my words—I don't know what to talk about sometimes. And my hands—look at them! They are red and rough—he used to pity them and smooth them with his own.”

The passionate tones suddenly gave way and the speaker's chest heaved convulsively, her lips trembling and the fierce brightness of her eyes extinguished by unshed tears. Then she threw out her arms and, putting one across the other, rested her forehead on them while she swayed herself backward and forward in the speechlessness of despair.

“Oh, don't, don't; it grieves me to see you—it breaks my heart.” It was Frances who spoke, as with tears running down her face she laid her hand gently upon the shoulder of the girl.

Maggie slowly raised her head from its support and looked up with an expression of agony in her eyes.

“Ah, lady,” she said, “you do not know what you have done.”

“This is a cruel, a dreadful thing—oh, I

don't understand—I don't want to understand.”

“You must ask him yourself, lady, for I cannot tell you. Ask him about Maggie Tindale.”

“It is too hard a task.”

“Must I tell him to-morrow that you and I have met? For he asked me to meet him to-morrow in the quarry wood; and though I told him I would not go because I was angry, yet it was not true. I shall go. I lied to his face.”

“Yes, tell him.”

“I'm sure to go, for I think if I were dying and he called, I should crawl along the ground to reach his feet.”

With these words Maggie broke away from the hand that yet rested on her shoulder, her own clasped tightly upon her chest, as swiftly and without once turning her head she went down the passage, and after pausing for a few moments over the fastenings of the side-door, let herself hurriedly out.

Then, but not till then, Frances followed in the same direction, a deadly faintness and anguish seizing her. But one desire was present—to reach her own room and be alone, when she would try to face this terrible thing which had befallen her. So, with drooping figure and stumbling gait, she made her way into the hall, and there some one in rustling silk met her, and cried out in astonishment and anxiety at seeing her.

“Yes, it was too far—forgive me,” and Frances fell weeping hysterically upon Mrs. Aschenburg’s shoulder.

For half an hour Sidney sat motionless in the chair into which he had thrown himself when left by Maggie, his face covered with his hands, and his elbows as he leaned forward, resting on the arms of the chair. The sun had set, and a dim twilight filled that part of the room where, a short time before, he had stood in the pale glow. Beyond was darkness, where beneath the looped-up curtain and

around the easels and tapestried chairs, the shadows had kept watch like gigantic figures.

Of what avail could it be now to refuse to look forward, he was telling himself; to-morrow would dawn, and following close upon the dawn, would come the interview which he had determined to seek with Frances. His story with its culpable hesitations, self-indulgent acts of thoughtlessness and wrong-doing, should be told her by his own lips. There should be no withholdings, no palliations, nothing by which the least excuse for his actions should be sought. He would tell her the whole of it, so far as such a story could be told. And then he would give her back the promise made to him that afternoon. He would tell her—and how the faint beatings of his heart showed the sickening dread and revulsion which come when we seek to tear away our lifestrings—he would tell her that, though she were silent, he could hear the counsel of her words to

him, that though only her eyes were lifted up to meet his own, he could see the far-off vista of restitution to another in their depths. Standing merely by her side, he would know it all—know what course she would have him take, know how she would desire to see the girl whom he had betrayed protected by his home and name. But there would be something beyond this which she would desire. And the influence of the girl whom Sidney passionately loved worked further on him, and made the hitherto dead bones of certain tenets live. Marriage, an empty loveless marriage, would be no moral atonement for seduction ; a religious ceremony could only legalize the continuation of what had gone, it could not put those feelings in the heart which alone can save and purify. To make restitution he must not only marry, but revere her who had revered him too deeply to withhold her nature's full possession. This would be atonement, this would be restitution, and this he knew would be what Frances would desire.

And here in very bitterness and anguish of spirit Sidney groaned aloud.

Not yet, he told himself, not yet could he marry her, not yet could he tear the beautiful flower of love from his heart. Frances must help him in that, Frances must give him rough words ; must aid him by some ungentle deed of discourtesy, must herself tell him with unblanched cheek and steady lips to marry the village girl, and so raise between them a bar that could never be broken down. Not otherwise could he do it ; not otherwise dash the glittering roseate dew of happiness from his life.

Here Sidney sprang to his feet. The atmosphere of the room was stifling him. He must go out into the air. His hat and stick were on a table within reach of his hand, and, after groping for them in the darkness, he made his way to the door, and a second afterwards was going with rapid strides down the lamp-lit passage.



CHAPTER VII.

ACROSS THE MOOR.

ON the same afternoon Matthew Tindale was coming from Seatenner, a farmstead at the foot of Seatenner Fell, and was making his way down the road that leads to Staneby—an undulating road, which nevertheless descends steadily until it reaches the village itself.

A broad tract of land lies between Staneby and Seatenner, a beautiful piece of moorland taken captive by the hand of cultivation, and yet not drooping, not saddened, not rendered sulky by her chains. Nowhere in the low-lying lands does the sun shine as on this moor; people who have seen the glory of its brightness, return heavy-hearted, like mortals in a

fairy tale, back to their valleys. Children love to run there open-armed, and with shouts and laughter, get their hair entangled in its keen breezes. Even Dobbin, the old horse, moves more quickly upon the road that crosses it, and will sometimes curvet a little and pretend to shy at some tuft of grass, or handful of leaves that are being hurled before the wind. And nowhere else do the birds sing so joyously. In the meadows down in the valleys, you can count on a sunny day the larks by twos and threes, but up there they sing by tens and twenties : vigorous birds, that fly strong on the wing, and dash out the brightness of their song against the very gates of heaven.

Matthew was stepping out with long powerful strides, the lappets of his white linen jacket flying back from his chest, his face lifted up to catch the sunshine which was warm enough to burn his cheek to a deeper hue. One hand swung carelessly at his side, while the other held the basket of tools that hung across his

shoulder. The air of this, his native moorland, filled his veins with strong wine of life, and sent it reeling and eddying through brain and heart ; it braced every nerve, and his muscles were tightened beneath its influence ; it invigorated him, and he walked with the quick measured tread of one who is unconscious of the nature of the ground over which he travels.

No one would have supposed if they had seen him working at Seatenner, patiently listening to the instructions that were given him, accurately measuring, deftly fitting piece to piece, and cunningly contriving, that there was the presence of an inward haste seeking to drive him to an unseemly completion of his task. And yet so it was ; for the desire to be on the road from Seatenner to Staneby, just at the time a village girl should be driving her father's cows from one of the fields on the moor, had taken such possession of him, that he had to exercise a close watchfulness over himself, lest through the desire for the completion of his work, might come a slovenly

touch. But the smoothness of the brow was kept, and the clear, straightforward expression of the eye, the firm, enduring lines of the mouth, and the sure, steady, slow movements of the hands.

Although his heart was full of glad expectation, he walked silently down the road, neither whistling nor singing, his chest working with inspirations as deep as though he had been swinging the heaviest hammer, and his thick nostrils extended with his breathing. It is so easy for the mind to become filled with doubts and fears ; at times the air seems to be full of them, and they come upon us like winged sprites. What if he were just too late for Bella ? Or what if Bella had not got to her father's field ? Could he turn back with her, saying he would help her to drive the cows home ? Would there not be some danger of her laughing at him ? It might be only good-natured laughter, but still she would laugh in a way that would make him feel he dare not persist in walking with her, for Matthew was

not at all sure whether pretty Bella Hind favoured him in the way he would desire. And Matthew, hoisting the basket of tools still farther on to his shoulder, looked at his watch and then at the sun, to see if there were any well-grounded hopes of his coming upon Bella before she left the moor.

At length a turn in the road brought him within sight of the field in which Bella's cows grazed. He looked eagerly at it, shading his eyes from the sun. And his face relaxed and a smile played about his mouth, for there stood Bella, sure enough, with her hand upon the gate ; and when he bent his ear to listen, his eyes glistened, for he could hear her calling "How, how," in tones which, though faint, were yet borne distinctly to him upon the breeze.

"How, how," she called, and Blackie and Daisy and Roany lifted up their heads, and turned them toward their mistress, then looked back again, and wound their lithe tongues round some tender morsel. "How,

how." And again they turned dreamy eyes to the girl who stood at the open gate, and this time wheeled slowly, and in sauntering bovine fashion, came down the field, pausing every now and again to pick up a mouthful of grass, or with a swing of their huge heads, to knock off some blood-thirsty fly that had settled on their hides. "How, how—come Blackie—come Daisy—come Roany—it's milking time, an' ye must come home."

Matthew's quickened pace had brought him within ear-shot of the last words, and when he saw that Bella had her back turned toward him and could not know of his approach, a gleam of merriment came into his eyes, and he laughed to himself, How she would start when he called her; and how angry she would pretend to be at seeing him.

Blackie and Roany and Daisy had by this time reached the gate, and Bella was closing it after them, somewhat impeded in her movements by the long hawthorn stick which she carried.

“Let me lift it up.”

Bella's hands closed tightly on the bars of the gate, and she gave a little start and an exclamation at the words. Then she looked over her shoulder at the speaker.

“Whatever made ye do that, Mattha? I nearly skirllled right out.” And Bella pouted and frowned, but had quickly to turn her head away, lest Matthew should see her blushing face, and the smiles that would come in spite of herself.

“Well, what hev I done that ye should find fault?” As the blacksmith spoke, he put his arm between the bars of the gate, and, lifting it up, soon had the chain fastened on the nail, smiling meanwhile down at Bella.

“Well, coming up to a body like that without any warning.” And Bella turned abruptly, and set off walking quickly after the cows, handling the branch of hawthorn like an Alpine stock, and striking it firmly down on the ground.

Matthew overtook her in half-a-dozen strides, and, with an expression of quiet satisfaction upon his face, and eyes that still gleamed with subdued merriment, he assured her he never meant that she should be frightened ; adding that as he was going the same road, he had thought they might as well walk home together.

“ Well, if I let ye—mind, it’s only because the road is lonesome like, an’ ye’ve made me all of a twitter with coming on me so sudden.” And Bella gave her head a toss.

“ All right, Bella. I’ll never quarrel with anybody about the colour of the basin they give me my poddish in. I guess it’ll taste as good in one as another.”

“ If ye mean that any excuse ’ll do for ye to walk with me, I can tell ye, Mattha, ye’re mistaken.”

“ What makes ye flout at me to-day, Bella ? ”

“ It’s more likely to be your fault nor mine.”

“Well, well, I’ll take the blame if that’ll make ye easy.” Matthew was still smiling at the little figure in the buff bed-gown and short purple petticoat, which was stepping out with such an amusingly aggrieved air by his side. He could not see the face because of the sun-bonnet, but he could imagine its expression ; the pretty rosy lips compressed into a narrow line of red, while the dark eyebrows would be drawn together over eyes which could not look ill-humoured if they tried. He was growing accustomed to Bella’s little feints of anger, and disregarded them as he would have done the gambols of a kitten, which, while evidently wishing to be friendly, made a display of teeth and claws.

So they walked for a little time in silence. Then Bella lifted up her face to him, and gave a shy repentant smile.

The mock clouds and darkness had vanished, and as Matthew looked at the comely rosy face, his great strong heart gave a vigorous throb, and he felt how pleasant a thing it

would be to have Bella walking beside him all his life.

“Well, Bella,” he said, and there was a growing brightness in his eyes, and a deepening of the colour upon the tanned cheek; and it might be that he came a trifle—but a trifle, however—nearer to her.

“Well, Mattha,” returned Bella. She felt very shy, and dropped her eyes from his face. Then, becoming more self-possessed, she asked him whether he had been doing an odd job for somebody upon the Fell side, that he came to be on that road so early in the afternoon.

“Ye see, Bella, I am obliged to work harder than I did before that old chap that was called Mark Tindale died.” Matthew had never before mentioned his affairs to Bella, and the pleasurable sensation which comes when we enter into a confidential talk with that one person who fills the whole world for us, was new to him. “Ye see my expenses,” he continued, “hev come to be very heavy, an’ my savings melt away quicker nor I can fill them

up, however hard I work ; so I'm glad enough to get a job away from home when father can manage rightly without me ; for I can work overtime at night an' in the mornin both when I'm at t' smithy."

Matthew turned his head to look over the wide-spreading valley where it ran northward, an undefined feeling of uneasiness and anger taking possession of him, toward the man who had committed a wrong, for which he, the innocent one, was having to suffer. For was it not this very spending of his savings which had prevented him, and was even at that moment preventing him from making some unmistakable sign of his growing affection for pretty Bella Hind ? Those advertisements in the American and English papers, were threatening not only to engulf the small stock of gold which was hoarded beneath his bed, but also, vampire-like, to suck each sovereign from him as it was made—those advertisements would draw his life from him, his arms becoming lean and trembling from

over-work ; his eyes looking with feverish glances over cheeks that were bloodless and hollow ; until at length he would stumble, hammer in hand, into the grave. And Matthew's feet smote the ground angrily.

"Do you think, Mattha," began Bella thoughtfully, "that it's a bit o' use you going on to try to find Tom Tindale's widda. If she'd been alive, I'se sure ye wad hev heard of her by now. People are always very sharp of either seein' or hearin' where there's a bit o' money."

Matthew made no reply, but swept his far-seeing eyes slowly round the horizon where the pale grey hills rose up against the sky, while he strove to silence the voice of an inward tempter, which was suddenly making itself heard like an echo to Bella's words.

"She was always a sickly woman as I've heard," went on Bella : "and it's just as likely as not that the child will hev taken after her, an' they're both dead and buried by this time. Besides, there'll hev to be a stopping place,

ye can't go on with this advertising for ever."

"I mean to carry the advertising on as long as I've got any money, Bella," he presently said. "And when that's spent, I've done all in my power to help Tom Tindale's widda. An' after that the property must just go into Chancery."

"But if ye're never goin' to take the property, and if ye spend such a sight 'o money in trying to find them 'at ye want to hev 't, it seems to me that ye'd hev been richer without your Uncle Mark makin' you his heir." This idea had just dawned upon Bella, and made her feel much perplexed.

"Ay, Bella, it doesn't take much to see that." And Matthew threw back his shoulders uneasily, still keeping his eyes upon the far-off horizon.

"But, Mattha, surely we were never meant to punish ourselves for other people's sins—if ye'll excuse me speakin' so disrespectful of yer uncle 'at 's dead."

“I don’t know, I’m sure. I believe we cannot rightly help it—the sins saddle themselves on us somehow. The Bible, ye know, tells a lot about the sins of the fathers until the third an’ fourth generation.”

For the first time Matthew looked from the far-away line of hills, and turned his head so that he might see the round dimpled face which came a little below his shoulder. Did she know how sorely she was tempting him, he wondered; for in these days it seemed to Matthew, as if the spending of his savings was as the increase of the number of years for which he would have to serve for his Rachel.

“Well, but, Mattha,” continued Bella, still feeling sorely puzzled; “if ye never mean to take it yerself, why don’t ye put it right away into Chancery?”

“An’ get it all wasted? Nay, Bella, I’s young and strong, an’ I’ll try to keep it together for them as ought to hev it, as long as I can do a day’s work. If I hed been married”—he was getting dangerously near

the subject that lay closest his heart—"if I hed been married, things wad hev been different; and mebbe I couldn't hev helped Tom Tindale's widda to her own as I wad ha' liked."

The last words went like a breath of east wind across Bella, and she made no reply; it was almost as if he had told her he had no thoughts of marrying. The hope of ever being Matthew's wife was for the moment dashed from her; and when she did speak, it was as if she had been forced into being a disinterested party and compelled into looking on at this old game of loving and wooing, which was being played by herself and Matthew; and she spoke slowly and quietly, standing so far apart from herself, that what she said failed to touch her as her own words in her own actually realized person would have done. And yet she unconsciously put forward in it her own feelings.

"You said just now, Mattha, that if ye'd been married ye wad have had to have

managed things different for Tom Tindale's widda. Well, it seems to me that ye're grander about it than most men wad be, an' that yer wife might like to boast that she had such a man for her husband as wasn't to be found if one lated (sought) all over the Fell side."

Matthew started, and once more looked away at the distant hills, a flush of pleasure dyeing his face.

Then he said slowly, and as if he were making a great effort to keep himself cool and collected, "Ye mean to say that you, Bella, if ye were my wife would stand by me an' say I was doin' right?"

It seemed to him several minutes before he heard her answer, although in reality it was only so many seconds.

"If I were yer wife, Mattha," and here Bella's eyes fell to the ground, and the colour played fitfully over her face—"if I were yer wife," she repeated, hesitatingly and tremulously, "I wad tell ye to lay out yer

earnings as it seemed best. It's mebbe grand and noble like to keep the property together for them 'at ought to hev 't—indeed, I think I've got a proper glint on't now. An' I wad be proud o' ye, an' if it made ye a poor man, well, I wad say to myself, never mind he's richer nor many a gentleman."

A sudden fulness came into her throat, and she could say no more.

Matthew walked on with a deep, wild kind of delight beating in his heart. What was this that he had just heard—Bella saying it was great and noble to try to serve Tom Tindale's widow—Bella saying she would be proud of him—and Bella thinking that though a poor man, yet he would be rich. Dare he, a penniless blacksmith, with only his craft to depend upon, raise his eyes to a yeoman's daughter? In those glad moments he could not trust himself to speak, lest his lips should play him false, and ere he was aware, babble of the love that was in his heart.

The silence continued so long that Bella became nervous and frightened, and, as in the old days when a child she played in the smithy about his feet and blamed her own conduct for some misunderstood silence of his, she asked the same old question—

“Mattha, are ye angry with me?”

“Angry, Bella!” And Matthew turned his face to hers, the glow yet lingering on it which her words had kindled. “Angry! nay rather ye’d better ask me how much happiness ye’ve thrust into my heart.”

Bella had never before heard that thrill in a man’s voice, when its modulation is in harmony with the passion of love in his soul, and her heart beat fast and her cheeks turned very red as she strove to stoop her head so low that Matthew, although he was trying, could not catch a glimpse of her face beneath the uptilted sun-bonnet.

“Did ye not know, Bella, that I could not be angry with ye,” exclaimed Matthew. Then, in a gentle voice that played about her

ears like a caress, he added, "Cush, my lass, there's some things I reckon that men folk 'll never turn against, and the women they've a likin' for are among them."

They both walked on silently, Bella very rosy and very happy, with her eyes sometimes dimmed with tears, sometimes bright and sparkling, but always bent on the ground as though she were seeking there for some token of Matthew's love. But Matthew for the most part held his head erect; upon his face an expression of full, satisfied, and perfect happiness, though sometimes—and this was done with an air of shyness—he would glance down at the little tripping figure at his side.

The sun was low as they turned into the road that leads through Staneby, and the cottages were throwing long shadows across it; but where there were neither cottages nor buildings of any kind, a rich flood of amber light spread itself over the orchards and gardens, and across the gently rising slopes

which ran as a green island between the roads on either side of the village. It touched the low-roofed houses beyond, and threw a flame of orange and crimson upon their windows. It lay upon the broad, undulating tracts of moorland; and at the foot of the fells, the yellows and browns of the quickly fading bracken were turned by it into a glory of pure dead gold. The air, with the premonitory sharpness in it that tells of coming frost, was fragrant with the scent of the stubble-fields which were beginning to glitter with dew. A delicately pure sky hung over the landscape, and opalescent lights and bars of palest gold were in the west.

When they were near the smithy Matthew took a sudden determination within himself, and without a word of preface, said, as he slung the basket of tools from his shoulder—

“If yer father’s likely to be in to-morrow night after church, I’ll step in, an’ if he hes a mind, we’ll hev a pipe together.”

Matthew had never made such a suggestion before, and Bella knew what it meant.

And so they parted, she blushing and smiling, and he with a look of intense happiness upon his face.





CHAPTER VIII.

A BROTHER'S LOVE.

Two hours later, and darkness settled upon the valley—that subdued darkness which is but a deeper kind of twilight before the rising of a full moon. A pale radiance was already covering the eastern sky, and a faint light was marking the place on the Pennine range where the solemn looking disc would presently appear as a line of gold, which, broadening and deepening, would at length clear the obstruction of the hills, and pour out a flood of light.

The workpeople had all come back to their cottages in Staneby, and, the day's work over, were sitting quietly at their evening meal.

The village green was deserted, and the roads that half an hour before had been busy with labourers returning from the fields, were now silent and empty. Matthew Tindale alone was carrying his working hours into the night.

And while he was steadily working, along the fisherman's path, sometimes running, sometimes walking, came his sister from the futile interview with Sidney Aschenburg. She felt as if she were trying to run from a great terror and agony. She wanted to get into Matthew's presence, to be near him, to be able to fall down at his feet and say, "Under-take for me ; I have no strength to carry out what I desire." This was the sole thought that filled her mind.

At length she paused to take breath in the village lane, and with ear and perception quickened by the strain upon her nervous system, she strove to find out from some sound which came from the smithy whether her father had left his work. It needed

but few seconds, after listening to the fall of one hammer on the anvil, for her to know, through long familiarity with the sounds from the smithy, that it was the stronger arms and firmer hold of the younger man that plied it.

Presently the blows from the hammer ceased, and as she came nearer to the forge she heard the sounds of some one moving within the smithy, and the faint clinking of iron; again the rhythmical blowing of the bellows, soft at first, but gradually increasing in strength, until the subdued roar of the flames ran with it as an accompaniment. Then Maggie stepped within the doorway, and gave a frightened glance round.

Matthew was the only occupant of the place. With one arm working the bellows, the other resting on his hip between the intervals of the withdrawal of the long bar of iron, whose end was resting within the coals, his square straight shoulders turned upon the doorway, he stood unobservant of his sister's entrance.

She must make the most of this opportunity of speaking to him alone, she thought, an opportunity which, if she let slip, might not occur again for hours. So, treading noiselessly over the refuse which covered the floor, she stood in a moment by her brother, and laying her hand upon his arm caused him to start and turn round with a look of astonishment.

“Hallo, Maggie,” he said in his cheerful voice, in a moment adding, with a preceptible change of tone, “What is it my lass? Are ye wantin’ anything from me?” The arm which held the pole of the bellows ceased from the long steady downward pulls, moving it slowly, but still by reason of long habit, at regular intervals.

“Nothing, Mattha,” returned Maggie, the pallor of her face and the dark lines under her eyes belying her words.

But Matthew did not turn away, only bent his eyes more scrutinizingly upon hers.

“Mattha,” and the girl’s voice began to

tremble, "I've got to know that he's taken up with a lady. I don't know that I can tell ye all about it, for I feel like to choke." There were no tears in the girl's eyes, but the muscles were beginning to twitch convulsively round her mouth.

Matthew did not speak, but he lifted up his head, and, looking over Maggie, his nostrils became distended, his brows knitted, and his teeth ground fiercely; while the hand which worked the bellows tightened round the pole, and pulled it down with swift strokes until the fire roared and sent up one steady pillar of flame.

"Mattha, ye willn't tell mother?" and here dry tearless sobs, sobs which convulsed the girl's bosom and caused the muscles in her throat to stand up like cords, stopped her utterance.

There was a long pause. Matthew's eyes came back slowly to his sister's face, but his expression of fierce anger never altered. And then he said, in a hoarse voice, "I'll tell the

whole village. I'll tell everybody about the place that he's a liar, an' that he's done as badly by you as ever did any chap."

"Ye must not, Mattha, I tell ye; I couldn't bear it." The sobs hitherto had been dumb voiceless ones, but now each one came burdened with a deep, low moan. But still there were no tears; the dark beautiful eyes were dry and widely opened, and looked up with the glazed expression seen in an animal that is struck with death.

Matthew's face suddenly changed, and it seemed as if there was in it a loosening of all restraint, and a casting aside of the bonds of reserve so characteristic of the northern nature. His lips trembled, and the signs of emotion came to his eyes which in a man are so pitiable to see; and, turning hurriedly away from his sister, he took up the bar of iron and used it as a poker amongst the red hot coals.

"Mattha, old chap. I'se wantin' ye to help me."

The blacksmith made no answer, but continued raking the fire with the bar of iron.

“Will ye stand by me, Mattha? Will ye go an’ see him an’ tell him that he’s got me into trouble, an’ that all t’ village will cry shame o’ me?”

The iron rod was suddenly released, and Matthew sprang round with an infuriated expression upon his face. His nostrils were widely distended; his eyebrows drawn together, overhung eyes that had lost all benignity of look, and his lips were raised in such a manner that the front and canine teeth were visible.

“*What* do ye say, Maggie?” His voice was trembling with passion, and his hands were laid with violence upon his sister’s shoulders.

“Mattha, I feel like as if I could die.” The tearless sobbing never ceased, nor the moan that accompanied each catching of the breath.

“May God in heaven damn him!” cried the blacksmith, clenching his right hand, and striking out as if at some invisible foe.

“No, no, Mattha—no, no!” and the girl’s hand made as if it were seeking after the bare uplifted arm. But Maggie was half-blinded and her hand only groped after empty air. “Oh, Mattha, Mattha, I love him—don’t say a word against him. I love him, although I have seen him kissing another woman. Yet, Mattha, I would go down on the ground an’ kiss his feet, if I could only know that he would not send me away from him, but would sometimes lay his hand upon my head as he used to do. Oh, Mattha, Mattha, do people ever really break their hearts an’ die?”

“Oh, hush, my lass!” And he laid one hand against her cheek.

“Mattha, Mattha, I feel as if all my strength has gone away an’ as if I shall die.” And the speaker fell toward the broad

chest and strong arms, that from a little child had ever been to her as a hiding-place from a storm.

The arms were thrown round her, and Matthew bent his face until it rested against the head from which the black straw hat had fallen. "My lass, my lass," were the only words he said, and he kept patting her shoulder with one of his broad hands.

"Mattha, will ye go to him an' tell him—I cannot do it any more for myself—will ye go to him an' say how that I would be his true an' faithful wife. An' tell him—oh, Mattha, I've got no words for this part—tell him that I love him, fairly like as if I said my prayers to him—just as if he had come into the place of Almighty God to me. When I kneel down every night and morning I think of nobody but him, an' when I say 'Our Father,' I feel that his name is sacred just like God's."

To Matthew it seemed as though he must lose his senses if the sound of his sister's sobs,

that beat at regular intervals upon the air, were not restrained.

“Will ye go for me, Mattha, old chap?”

“I cannot bear this, my lass. I cannot bear to see you like this.” And the blacksmith raised his head from his sister’s, and with wan and haggard face looked across the fire to the blackened wall of the smithy.

“Go for me, Mattha,” pleaded the voice, the moan becoming deeper in the catching of the breath, and sounding like a low wail in her listener’s ears.

“Do ye know what ye’re askin’ of me? Do ye know that ye’re makin’ me go to beg from a man that I would curse?”

“Oh, Mattha, Mattha, I cannot bear it. You’ll kill me.” And the head that had hitherto been held erect sank with the sudden action of despair.

There was a pause, and Matthew, under an impulse that he could not have explained, lifted his sister’s face—they seldom kissed each other, this brother and sister—and

pressed his lips upon her cheek. Then it was that he saw the dull eyes that had been held so widely open begin to weep, and heard the pitiful sobbing, which was so much more pitiful because of its being unaccompanied by tears, change its tone, and though sad and heart-breaking, become more natural and unconstrained.

“My lass, I’ll do anything for ye; ye know I will. Ye know I would cut off my hand to set ye right. Oh, my lass, would to God you had——” Matthew paused; these vain regrets would only lay another burden upon his sister. Then he continued, his voice hardening as he spoke, “I’ll do what I can for ye. I’ll go and see Mr. Sidney Aschenburg this very night.”

“I knew ye would, old chap; I knew ye would so soon as I told ye all.” And here Maggie laid her face against her brother’s shoulder, and wept with the lessened anguish of a child that has passed on its burden of sorrow to another.

“Whisht, my lass, whisht!” The grimy hand smoothed and patted the head which had pillowed itself so confidingly; “whisht, I cannot bear to hear you cry like this.”

“I will, Mattha, I will—only give me a little bit o’ time.”

Gradually the sobbing ceased, and Maggie raised herself from her brother’s arms, and standing erect, looked up at him with tear-stained face and eyes swollen with weeping. But because true love will give a smile, even if stricken unto death, so her trembling lips parted, and an expression crossed her face like a gleam of sunshine following close upon a wintry storm, as she said in a voice that still trembled—

“Ye’ve been a grand brother to me, Mattha, a grand brother. And I don’t think, as long as ever I live, I’ll forget yer kindness to me as far back——” Here her voice broke, and for a minute all her efforts at self-control were unavailing.

She walked across the floor of the smithy,

her hands pressed tightly on her chest, the strange tearless sobs once more convulsing her frame. Again she struggled with herself, again she strove to regain some degree of composure. She walked backward and forward across the smithy, her hands sometimes lifted from her chest to the throat where the muscles were leaping and quivering with spasmodic throes ; but it was some minutes before she paused beside her brother, and with a final effort was able to hold back that pitiful catching of her breath.

“Mattha, I mustn’t talk any longer o’ this way.” Her voice was in the low key of one who is speaking under some powerful restraint. “I’m frightened o’ settin’ myself off cryin’ in such a way as mebbe I can never stop. An’ I’ve got all the evening to get through. An’ there’s father—he’ll mebbe be wantin’ me to straighten up his accounts for him ; an’ there’s mother—I promised I’d help her to choose the pattern for her quilt.”

Matthew—and how different in heart from

the Matthew of two hours ago—stood erect and silent ; his back turned upon the smithy fire, his eyes resting upon the figure of his sister, as she turned slowly away from him with these words, and with heavy uncertain tread made her way round the anvil toward the open door. When she had disappeared he took the bar from the hot coals, and throwing it down upon the ground before him, left it unheeded among the rubbish. While choking down the bitter rage that was in his bosom, he seated himself upon the edge of the stone trough beside the hearth, and buried his face between his hands.

The candle that was fixed into a rude iron socket upon the block of wood which supported the anvil, had burnt low during the interview between Maggie and her brother, and the wick had curled and fallen a charred mass down the side of the candle, as the tallow trickled drop by drop into a pool upon the floor. The flame sputtered and threw up a column of black smoke until,

becoming half choked in the melted tallow, it flickered, leaping up and dying down alternately, soon with a final hiss to go out utterly, and leave the smithy in such light as was thrown out by the now dimly burning fire.

At that moment Matthew lifted his head from his hands, and, rising with the air of one who has a determined purpose in his mind, rolled down the checked shirt-sleeves that were still above his elbows, and taking the white linen jacket from the nail where he had hung it on his return from the moor, put both arms into it, and after some twisting and writhing soon had it upon his shoulders. He was wearing the brown paper cap which was usually on his head during working hours, and which he was accustomed to exchange for a black felt wide-awake on leaving the smithy; but his mind was too full of the resolution which he had taken of endeavouring to see Mr. Sidney Aschenburg that night for him to remember it. And so, without so

much as a glance at the work which was lying on the anvil, he stepped out of the dimly-lighted smithy into the soft radiance of the moonlight.

Two hours later Matthew was again in the smithy, working with a strange and fierce energy. There were unusual marks of physical weariness upon his face ; and although his eyes were bright and feverish, his cheeks were sunken, and the muscles of his lips seemed to have lost their power of tension ; and his hands and arms as they lifted and swung the huge hammer trembled, and there was a perceptible difference in the force of the blows. To an onlooker it would have appeared that the links which he was forging swiftly, and joining one by one to the long clanking chain that lay upon the ground at his feet, were part of an appointed task which must be finished before he could go to rest. But Matthew would have said, had his knowledge of words been greater, and if

he had cared to take that onlooker into his confidence, that he was working in order to break away from enthralling bands ; that he was striving to tear himself away from a self that henceforth would for ever carry about with it a horrid memory—the grasp of hands that held his with the strength of despair ; a movement, a struggle, a sound as of rending garments, and the remembrance of an herculean effort ; then of freedom and the sense of standing alone ; and after that the sound of branches brushed aside and the fall, plummet-like, of some object into water ; to be followed by a horrible stillness, with a sense of vacuity and darkness.





CHAPTER IX.

THE STRUGGLE.

So soon as Sidney Aschenburg had let himself out of the front door at Derthwaite, his hurried movements were changed for those slow ones which accompany deep abstraction. He walked along the terrace, his head drooping forward, and his eyes fixed upon the ground.

It was a fair, beautiful night, without the slightest breath of air to break upon the stillness; and after Sidney had taken the path that leads through the shrubbery to the meadows, and had opened the wicket gate, a broad stream of moonlight swept over the valley as though a curtain had been uplifted.

But he marked none of these things; he was like a man in a dream.

After a time he wandered off the path, and, heedless of the dew which was lying like frosted silver upon the grass, walked as a man who has no fixed aim from point to point of the meadow; sometimes across it with steps that ever deviated, sometimes by the side of one of its hedge rows, sometimes standing with head held forward and with eyes that seemed to be seeking for some object on the ground. Once an owl called its to-whit-to-whoo far off in the valley; and twice the quarters chimed from the clock at Staneby; but these were the only sounds that Sidney could have heard after he left the house. At length his feet struck upon the path once more, and this time he kept to it, but all unconsciously, and followed its curves without marking them, until the stile that divided the meadows from the quarry wood rose up before him. Then it was that he was awakened somewhat from his abstraction, and

lifting his hat from his head, passed his hand with a show of weariness across his temples, giving a half yawn, half sigh as, for the first time since he left the house, his eyes took note of the objects before him. He was hesitating whether further to pursue his walk or return by the way he had come ; then, as if doubtful of his own mind, he laid his hand upon the topmost bars of the stile, one foot resting upon its lowest rung. At last he vaulted over it, not, however, with his usual lightness and activity of movement, but heavily and as though the feat were unwonted.

So bright was the light of the full moon, that the shadows of the wood were rendered transparent, and the trees themselves stood out in bold distinctness from the foliage or undergrowth beyond. Flecks of moonlight fell across the path at intervals ; and there were places in the wood where the brackens and “blaberry” spread themselves uninterruptedly to its light. Everything was motionless here as in the meadows ; not even a tremour

in the topmost leaves of the birch that hung its lace-like foliage over the cliff. A leaf sometimes dropped and fluttered against branch and foliage till it reached the ground, so breaking the stillness ; or a field-mouse rustled the dry pine-needles, as it smelt about in search of food, and then paused alarmed by the rustling which its own movements had made ; once a rabbit sent up a piercing cry as it felt the teeth of a weasel at its neck ; and a bird that had been dreaming of hips and haws and sweet yew-berries, slipped off its perch and, with a flutter of its wings, fell to a lower branch, where, half dazed, its little feet clasping the new resting place, it slowly turned its head and again buried it deeply beneath its wing.

Once over the stile, Sidney walked unhesitatingly up the shelving path ; sometimes in the thin transparent shadow, sometimes in the bright moonlight. The attitude in which he had wandered about the meadow, the loosely hanging arms, the uncertain gait, the droop-

ing head, was changed. His head was now held erect, and where the moonlight fell between the interlaced arms of trees and across his path, it shone fully upon the lower part of his face. His step, if wanting the elasticity which was usually so marked a trait in it, was yet firm and his feet trod evenly and steadily upon the path, even where it was broken by roots of trees or up-torn by the waters of some miniature wintry cascade. The tension of his arms was tightened, and the stick that he carried in one hand touched the ground lightly at every step; while the other hand was carried, according to his wont, in the pocket of the light grey morning coat.

He passed the place where Frances had fallen, and looked up at the projecting rocks and steep declivities that were made doubly horrible by the shadows and the moonlight, and he shuddered and caught his breath. What would he have done if that fall had been fatal to her? A thrill passed through

him like a shock of electric pain ; and he took a deep breath, retaining it in his chest for several moments and stepped on with some slight increase of speed. His soul would have been smitten suddenly and forcibly apart from hers ; he would never have had her in his arms, have never heard the whispered murmurs of her love—but then she would have died without knowing the bitter humiliation of his shame. Which would have been better ?

He had reached that point where the path is at its highest from the river, the water swirling sullenly below over the sharp rocks that border the pool of the Devil's Pot. Some of the brushwood had been cleared away from the border of the path, leaving a plateau that was covered only with a feeble growth of weeds and fern, for there was a pleasant peep to be had from here of the valley with the river winding in and out of the meadows, and the hills beyond. As Sidney reached this point he paused. It was here in the spring months that he had come accidentally

upon Maggie Tindale, and had offered to dig up the root over which her weaker hands were uselessly struggling.

But he was not thinking of her, only of that problem which he had set himself a few minutes before.

Would he have been happier, if instead of the exquisite joy of knowing that his love was returned—if instead of this joy, with that asp-like bite of pain beneath it which throbbed and ached—would he have been happier, if death had come and sealed eye and ear and lip, and had for ever shut out the fear that she, his darling, should have to confess that he was less worthy than she had deemed? Would he have been happier, he asked himself, would he have been content with the exchange? Would he have been satisfied to know that if she were withdrawn from the reach of his words of love, she was also safely hidden from the knowledge of his shame?

And as Sidney mused, he lifted up his face with its pallor of suffering to the white moon-

light. Could he have waited to tell her that golden story of his love through the silent years ; through youth, manhood, and old age ? Could he have patiently waited until eternity had dawned ?

Bah ! the secret of death would have to be unlocked by both before *that* could come ; the secret upon which the eyes of the ages have ever turned curiously ; the secret of what comes on the other side the grave ; the secret of what awaits us, of which perhaps, after all, death its custodian has thrown away the key.

During the few minutes that followed, Sidney stood with upturned face, the moon-light whitening his cheek and turning each hair of the fawn-coloured moustache to palest gold.

Better as it was, he said to himself ; better a thousand times to know that he had told her of his love—yes, even with the knowledge of the coming misery that lay behind.

And yet almost before this thought had been formed, another came and interwove itself with

it. Like a summer dawn, tremblingly at first, and with shooting, fitful rays, the mists and clouds of selfishness were slowly dispelled, until by one bold upward sweep his spirit grasped for the first time the fulness of a great human love. And as he stood there in the moonlight, he would have given his life to have undone the past ; not only so far as it concerned Maggie, but even so far as the saying of the lightest word were concerned, whereby the even tenure of Frances's life had been disturbed. For one ineffable moment his soul was steeped in love's immensity, every sordid and earthly emotion banished from it ; until, as was his face beneath the moonlight, so was his spirit whitened by the purity of its light. The perplexities, the annoyance and the troubles of his position were forgotten ; all thought of self was banished, while the one vain desire possessed him that even with that vast love in his heart, it had been possible silently to stand aside and dissociate his past from those with whom it was so closely bound.

For one moment he touched that highest point where human love merges into the divine; but the next, the heavy hand of despondency, care, and worry laid hold of him, and drew him down from the fair light into the shadowy mists and clouds of earth.

A hare came sauntering along the path where Sidney stood, and paused before him with erect ears and haunches ready for a sudden spring. But even as she watched him, her attention must have been caught by some sound, for with a scuffle she darted off at a right angle into the wood.

Sidney had watched her movements; and as at times a great weight of thought will be powerless to bind us, and the merest trifle will lead us into a careful train of reflection upon itself, so did Sidney ponder upon the fact that the hare when startled did not retrace her steps, but struck off the path and leaped into the wood, heedless of the untrodden grass and bramble branches. Here the dull

regular beat of a man's step broke faintly upon the silence and brought the solution of the problem. Sidney moved half a yard from the centre of the path, turning round so as to have his back upon the pedestrian, and, leaning upon his stick, looked through the cleared space between the bushes upon the valley beyond, once more following his own reflections. The passer-by was nothing to him, and beyond the first noting of his footsteps, had gone out of his thoughts.

The dull thudding of the tread upon the dry ground drew nearer, and the footsteps paused as they came up to Sidney Aschenburg. At the sudden cessation of sound, Sidney looked round upon the intruder.

“Tindale !”

Sidney was startled, and both his tone and action betrayed it. Instantly, however, he tried to recover himself, and with well-assumed ease, spoke upon the fineness of the night ; then, almost before the words had passed his lips, turned on his heel, falling into the

position in which he was standing when disturbed by the blacksmith.

“Mr. Sidney, I hev’n’t come to talk about the weather.” Matthew’s voice was hoarse, and his arms, which he held straight down at his sides, were trembling. He had not expected to see Sidney until he reached Derthwaite, and as yet had made no attempt to control the rage that had been working within him.

“What is it?” Sidney asked, with a slight touch of hauteur in his voice, as he turned round slowly.

“Need ye ask me, Mattha Tindale, what it is I’ve come to see ye about? Need ye make a fuss about words instead of goin’ right into t’ question?”

So Maggie had taken this brother of hers into her confidence, and had sent him to bargain and haggle and gain extra concessions. And for an instant a thrill of anger and indignation ran through Sidney. Would he not do what he could for the girl? Would he not honourably provide for her? And then the

thrill died away. He had wronged her and he must suffer. He must hear patiently what this man had to say.

Yet he could not rush upon his own accusation, but dallied with it and paltered with it as though he had not understood the meaning of Matthew's words. Then he remarked, as he beat the ground with an assumed air of indifference with his foot, "It would simplify matters if you would say plainly what it is you want to speak to me about."

"Well, then, I'll put it in as few words as I can. I've come to ask you about my sister. Is that plain enough—do you know now what I mean?"

Sidney was not more cowardly than most men; he could not accuse himself, but few can do that; but being accused, he could meet the charge with firmness.

"I understand you," he returned quietly, "and I would to God that it were otherwise." He was not thinking now of his love for Frances, and of the effects that his wrong-doing

would have upon it ; he was thinking rather of that vain desire which would have prompted him to lay down his life, if by so doing the sorrows he had entailed upon others could be averted. But Matthew could not know this, and answered accordingly.

“Don’t you talk o’ that way, it’s for me to say would to God things were different. She’s my sister, I tell ye, an’ whoever lays a finger on her to do her harm, lays his doubled-up fist on me.”

The rage which had risen in Matthew’s heart when his sister spoke to him in the smithy, here began to choke him and cloud his brain so that he could only speak indistinctly ; he had forgotten the line of argument which he had intended to enter upon, and which he had carefully planned while sitting on the stone trough by the smithy hearthstone.

“She is worthy of your devotion,” replied Sidney steadily.

“Ay, she is, you say right. An’ I’m glad

to find that ye can see it for yerself without me tellin' ye; it's more than I hoped. An' now that ye know the value of such a girl, perhaps ye'll tell me, Mr. Aschenburg, whether ye've made up yer mind to make her as good as yerself, an' put her into such a position as nobody can cry shame on her?"

There was a pause of a minute, each man looking the other steadily in the face. And then Sidney said slowly, but so firmly that his hearer was left in no doubt as to his intentions, "I have considered the matter carefully—I cannot marry her."

"Ye lying hound! I'll make ye wed her. I'll drag ye through Staneby till ye'll beg like a dog to be taken to the church. You say such a thing again if you dare, and, by God, I'll strike you dead." Matthew's great square shoulders were lifted to his ears, and the muscles of his hanging arms were standing out like quivering ropes, and his head was set forward, while he glared during these words at Sidney Aschenburg.

Sidney stood unmoved, his face set firmly, his eyes widely opened to the full moonlight, as he looked into the blacksmith's face, that was darkened by the shadow.

"Say it again," cried Matthew hoarsely.

Sidney made no response ; but there was the scarcely perceptible movement through his frame which denoted an increasing tension of the muscles, as though he were preparing for a physical encounter with his adversary.

"Don't ye stand there with yer mouth shut, or I'll find a way to make ye open it fast enough. Say what ye mean to do, like a man ; say either that ye'll wed her or ye won't."

There was a sudden blaze of indignation in Sidney's eyes, and his hand clutched the stick that he carried in his hand more firmly, and he said—

"You low-born fool ! do you think this is the way to get anything out of me. I meant to deal handsomely by your sister."

"Handsomely !" broke in Matthew. "Do

you dare to use that word to me. Take that." And blinded with rage he sprang forward, striking out with the rough brute power of a man whose muscular strength is unguided by skill.

Sidney had been quick to perceive his antagonist's movements, and parried the blow with his stick, returning it with one that would have fallen heavily on Matthew's head had not the force of it been broken by the blacksmith's arm. The next instant, Matthew wrenched the stick from Sidney's grasp and sent it whirling through the moonlight far into the wood, where it dropped between the oak branches. Then he dealt a blow upon Sidney's chest with such force that the young squire went reeling backward, staggering for several yards, and at last falling to the ground. In an instant, however, he was up again, his blood thoroughly roused, while he dropped at once into the attitude of a skilled boxer as he stood waiting for his opponent.

"Come up here ; there's no room to fight

down there on the footpath," cried Matthew, half suffocated with passion.

Sidney obeyed, and stepped on to the small plateau that had been cleared of brambles, Matthew watching with the fierceness of a gladiator until such time as he fell into an attitude that betokened readiness for fighting.

Then the struggle commenced, skill at one time gaining the ascendancy, at another brute force. Once Sidney caught the blacksmith just above the upper lip, and the teeth, cutting the flesh, blood began to ooze between the firmly compressed lips, and marked with a dark line the corners of the mouth. Twice Sidney had been down on his knees, but each time, with the agility of a cat, he had wound himself out of the blacksmith's grasp, and, springing backward for half a yard, rushed with increased energy at the Titanic figure, that threw out its arms with irresistible but ill-directed force.

Sidney was fighting as one who smarts beneath a lately received insult. His blood

was boiling, and he was striving with every nerve to humiliate his adversary. He took his breath in deep hard gasps, holding it within his chest, and expending it slowly; while Matthew, on the contrary, was breathing quickly through his nostrils with the labouring sound of an over-wrought animal.

To the blacksmith this struggle meant something more than revenge for the insult of an hour. The cares and anxieties of the past few months rose up like forgotten dreams, and, with the recollection of that which had so lately been communicated to him, turned his brain to madness. At first he desired only to strike Sidney Aschenburg to the earth. He had no thought beyond this. But when the slighter form of his opponent began to yield beneath the blows that happened to be too well aimed for skill to parry, and when twice he caught him by the shoulders and forced him to his knees, that fierce lust of blood took hold of him, which, however well concealed, and despite what civilization has done to stifle

it, yet rises up under given circumstances within natures that otherwise are noble. He no longer sought the humiliation of the man who had deeply wronged him, but desired in exchange for that irreparable injury no less a payment than his life.

The two men were now breathing heavily, their lips parted, their chests heaving.

Sidney struck a blow direct from the shoulder, which, if Matthew had not turned his head, would have caught him on the cheek. Whereupon the blacksmith, with a sudden movement, grasped the outstretched arm of his opponent, with a hold that was as firm and hard as one of his own iron vices, and forced it back against Sidney's side ; and then, still keeping his hold upon it above the elbow, he struggled to catch the other arm in the same way ; but Sidney doubled and turned before him on the little plateau, now with his face to the moonlight, now with it darkened by shadow.

In vain did Sidney try to wrench or twist

his arm from his opponent's grasp ; he could only move swiftly before him ; now to the right, now to the left, in the attempts to free himself. At length his foot slipped upon the short grass, and, throwing out his free arm involuntarily to regain his balance, it was caught and instantly pinioned by the powerful hands. A tremendous struggle followed, the blacksmith striving to keep the advantage he had gained, and Sidney as desperately trying to free himself.

The two men had now their sides to the moonlight, Matthew with his back to the wood, Sidney with his back upon the river. There was much swaying to and fro, and Sidney's slighter frame was bent at times from the waist, as though his opponent were trying to push him further from the path. Matthew's Titanic back never yielded an inch before his adversary, but was ever held firmly with shoulders that were set slightly forward.

The lighter made boots of Sidney Aschenburg slipped often upon the grass, Matthew's

roughly nailed ones bit and held the ground. Perhaps this was why the former, in order to straighten himself from the waist, had to step back continually an inch or two.

There was still the same writhing on Sidney's part, and the same efforts on Matthew's to keep him pinioned ; only with it all, the space between the struggling men and the footpath was ever broadening, and that between them and the edge of the cliff was ever narrowing. Sidney was not noticing this, however ; it was only Matthew, whose eyes were burning with a fierce light, who marked it.

At length they reached that part of the plateau, where the grass no longer struggled for existence, but yielded to the power of the barren rock which here forces itself up above the thin covering of earth ; and because Sidney's feet were the first to tread upon it, he gained a momentary advantage, and, getting for once a good foothold, with a tremendous effort he burst the iron bonds that had fettered

him. Too close to his adversary to deal anything like an effective blow, he aimed once more at the blacksmith's face, only to feel, however, the blow turned aside by the unlifting of a defensive arm. In the next instant the vice-like grip that had pinned his arms fell upon his wrists.

"Let go!" Sidney cried fiercely; as with a greater play of limb, he once more twisted and writhed to be free.

But Matthew took no notice, only bent and twisted with each turn of his opponent; each turn bringing them nearer to the plateau's edge.

"This is no way to fight. Let go my hands."

If possible the grip of Matthew's fingers became closer, and the firmness with which he pressed his opponent nearer to the edge of the cliff, more marked. The tension of his muscles was greater, and his eyes burned with a yet more lurid light; while between each gasp for breath his teeth ground upon one

another like those of a wild creature that is hungered, and is prevented by bars of iron from reaching its food. The sound of a woman's sobs were ringing upon his ears; sobs that had come laden with the moan of a broken heart; sobs that were tearless, and escaped half strangled from a convulsed throat.

Suddenly a cry of horror broke from Sidney, and he tore one wrist from the blacksmith's grasp with the energy of despair.

"Would you push me over?" he cried.

Still no answer; only the heated breath of his opponent fanning Sidney's face, as in striving to get away from the edge of the cliff, he got nearer to his adversary.

"Would you send me to my death?" And the free hand caught hold of the white linen jacket which Matthew wore.

The blacksmith wrenched himself back and the linen cracked and gave way, hanging finally in a deep loop where Sidney's hands had vainly caught it.

The two men were now on the brink of the cliff, where eighty feet below lay the Devil's Pot.

Twice the feet of one were flung over the edge, and twice they regained it and attempted to interlace themselves with the lower limbs of their opponent. The hands which at one time had striven to free themselves, were now clinging convulsively to the hands that would throw them off. The white face lifted to the moonlight was distorted by an expression of horrible anguish, the whole thought of the man being no longer broken up into kaleidoscopic fragments of memories, vain regrets, hope, love, fear, but assuming a unity, a strength that did not branch into a score of collateral offshoots, but grasped with the tenacity of despair the one hedged-in idea—the desire for life.

Sidney had forgotten Maggie, and the claim which she had upon him. He was unconscious even of the existence of Frances, and the joy which comes to a man when he knows

that he loves and is loved again. All the past was blotted out; life, his own individual life, which he seemed on the point of losing, was to him the only thing in the world. He had even lost the desire of humbling the man with whom he was struggling.

Once Sidney seemed to be gaining the advantage, and had almost got round to the right side of Matthew as he stood facing the cliff. But it was only momentary, the powerful arms forced him back again to the place in which his feet scraped and strove vainly to gain some hold upon the rock. Then there was another desperate struggle in which neither man spoke, the scraping of feet sounding continuously and mingling with the audibly sobbing breath of both the combatants.

Suddenly the cry, "Oh, my God!" rang out on the quiet night, and the feet gave their final scrape upon the edge of the cliff. There was a loosening of the vice-like hold . . . a falling backward . . . a last vain effort at

recovery, as one of the freed hands caught a bramble branch, whose tender roots yielded instantly to the strain and broke away from the crumbling soil. Backward into the moonlit gorge, the light grey figure outlined sharply against the side of the river where the shadows were thickest; backward, until it touched the surface of the water and cleaved a passage through its depths; backward, until the sudden striking against a rock caused Sidney Aschenburg to fall into that forgetfulness by which the doors of earth are for ever closed.

At the top of the cliff a man lay prostrate where the grass and the bare rock meet, his large frame shaking from head to foot, and his breath coming with quick short gasps, that seemed as though they must break both lungs and heart. His face was turned away from the moonlight, and his head drooped heavily with its own weight, while a sweat, cold and clammy, like that of death, lay upon his cheeks and forehead. The muscles in his

limbs were relaxed, and the arm by which he supported himself trembled beneath his weight.

After a time he raised his head a little; the relaxed and drooping frame gradually stiffened; and the breath came more quietly. Then he looked furtively round, his eyes scarcely lifting themselves beyond the low horizon of the plateau. The ground was torn up in places, and furrows were made in the loose sand. These must be smoothed. And he began to move slowly on hands and knees, straightening the ruffled grass and putting each weed back into its place, while he paused every third or fourth second to look round with straining eyes and ears.

Here is a pebble lying loose upon the hard rock; that surely will look suspicious; yes, it will do better there, half-buried in the soil. And that fern, it will droop and die if its roots are left uncovered. And here are unmistakable footprints crossing and recrossing one another; at any rate the soil here must

be made smooth. But what was that? Was it a footstep? No, not a sound.

Again the man went to work.

What is this? And he lifted it up to look at it. Seemingly a shred from his own jacket; and, as if he wished to store it away safely, he put it into one pocket, and then, as if not satisfied, took it out and put it into another. And now the man gropes further round upon the plateau. But why has he started back? What is it that his hand has touched? It is only a grey felt hat which had been trodden down into the soil. And yet he seems to be wondering what he can do with it, for he keeps looking in one direction and then in another, but always back again at the hat.

Now he takes hold of it and pushes it under the bramble bushes, where they grow at the thickest.

Was it the thorns of the brambles that made the man shrink? Or was it the touch of the soft felt itself? Yet he pushed it far in before he withdrew his arm.

A hare ran out of the wood, and the man sprang to his feet looking sharply round with a startled expression.

Perfect silence followed. Nevertheless he stood on the plateau intently listening. And it was only after several minutes elapsed that he slowly turned back again ; his eyes, instead of peering into the shadows of the wood, gradually fastening themselves upon the bramble bushes.

Was it a perfectly secure hiding-place ? When the leaves fell off would the branches alone afford proper concealment ?

The man doubted it ; and going once more upon his knees, he drew out the hat with trembling hand. Could he bury it, he wondered ? and he began to scratch and tear up the sandy earth. But before the hole was wide enough to take in the object for which it was intended, he paused shudderingly in his work and then raked in hastily the sand and grass and few fallen leaves ; the sickly womanish idea had seized him that he

was digging a grave, and with horror and loathing he turned aside from the self-imposed task.

How could he hide that bit of grey felt? Where could he put it to be certain it would never be found?

Another idea occurred to him. But he did not touch the hat where it still lay on the ground, only looked at it and sickened with the new thought that suggested a way for its disposal. Could he bring himself to do it, he wondered? Could he carry the thing to the edge of the cliff and throw it over? A horrible dread crept round the thought; and while allured by the belief that the hat if found below the cliff would be least like a finger-post of guilt, he yet shrank from throwing it there.

At length, with a hand that was cold and clammy, he lifted it up; and with faltering steps and unsteady vision stepped near the edge of the plateau, and with a movement of the arm that trembled and was weaker

at that moment than a woman's, he tossed the hat from him. He did not wait to see it fall below the cliff, but clasping his hands over his face, staggered back across the plateau even to the footpath where it skirted the wood.

"Oh, God," he murmured to himself. "I never meant to throw him over. I did not come here to take away his life. I was mad—mad with rage." Matthew's hands fell from his face as he said these words, and he raised his eyes to the broad heavens.

For several seconds he stood thus; motionless, pale and ghastly. Then he gave one glance at the place which for ever would remain before him in horrid memory, and, turning quickly, struck directly into the wood, going straight up the breast of the hill and so disappearing beneath the trees and shadows.

Again unbroken stillness fell upon the plateau; not a leaf of the bramble-bushes stirring, nor an empty seed vessel of the tall

flowering grasses. A hare came with long sauntering jump and daintly nibbled a leaf here and there, and then hopped leisurely down the fisherman's path. Once a weasel wound its lithe form in and around the root of a tree and then disappeared into a hole. But these were the only living things that broke upon its solitude. And the moon rose higher in the heavens and cast a glittering light upon every blade of grass, and upon every leaf, while upon the river beneath the cliff it threw a silver pall.





CHAPTER X.

THE POACHER.

AN hour later, and when Matthew Tindale's hammer might have been heard ringing upon the anvil, a man skulked along the side of the road that leads at the back of the quarry wood from Derthwaite. He lingered where the shadows of the trees lay thickest, and listened attentively for every sound before stepping from their protection into the bright moonlight.

The deep pockets of his shabby black coat were empty. The snare that he carried lay rolled up within the lining of his hat, so there was nothing but the fact of his returning at that late hour of the evening into Staneby

which could have excited suspicion. And yet the nearer he came to the village the more vigilantly did he peer into the shadows of every bush, and examine diligently the outline of every gate-post, and the trunk of every isolated tree which raised itself above the hedge-row. When the faint sounds of the hammer first fell upon his ear, he listened suspiciously, wondering whether it was the old man or his son at work ; for, unlike Maggie, he could not tell the difference between the stroke of the elder and of the younger Tindale's hammer. If it were the old man, he told himself, it would be as well for him to climb the wall on his right, and making a short *détour* through the fields, come into Staneby by another way ; should it, however, prove to be Matthew, he might consider himself safe on this more direct road into the village, so long as the clinking sounds of the hammer proclaimed that the younger blacksmith kept to the forge. For several minutes did Neddy Kendal, for it was he, bite his short

and blackened thumb-nail, cursing his ill-luck, and wondering how he could find a solution to his difficulty.

Perhaps the fact of his nerves being considerably shaken, prevented him remembering just at once what the whole village knew; namely, that the elder Tindale seldom worked after six o'clock in the evening, but would say to an impatient customer who was pressing some task upon him, that he had come to that time of life when he could afford to sit in his chair, meaning by that he had money in the bank, for the old man was proud of his savings. By degrees, however, the recollection of this fact dawned upon Neddy's mind. He was only, however, in a certain measure reassured by it, for the idea would present itself, that perhaps, this night of all others when the younger man should be safely housed, the elder Tindale might have seen fit to break through his rule and work over hours in the smithy. Tremblingly, therefore, he stepped from beneath the last of the broad shadows

which fell across the roadway, and into the full rays of the moonlight.

Neddy Kendal had got a terrible fright, and could scarcely summon sufficient courage to walk steadily in the middle of the road. He would have liked to have crept by the hedge-row all the way into Staneby, his head and shoulders lowered beneath its friendly shadow, had not a better judgment told him that if he walked erect in the moonlight, he would be less likely to be associated in the minds of any wayfarers he might meet, with snares just set on the Derthwaite estate, than if he were seen skulking in the shadow of the hedge-row.

For in spite of Mr. Aschenburg's admonitions and his tender dealings with the poacher, Neddy had again been setting snares in a wall that runs across a portion of the quarry wood at right angles with the fisherman's path. And it was in setting these snares, that his nerves had received the shock which sent him with more than his usual show of caution, back to Staneby.

He had been on the Derthwaite side of the wall ; that is to say, on the side upon which the moon did not shine, and had just succeeded in removing some stones with which the game-keepers had stopped up a small hole usually left open for ground game, and was in the act of fixing his snare, when the sound of approaching footsteps startled him. He drew back into the shadow and pressed himself as closely as he could against the wall, trusting that the darkness of his clothes would assist in concealing him.

The sound of the footsteps came nearer : heavy firm steps that occasionally snapped a twig upon the ground, or scraped harshly upon some projecting stone.

Neddy crouched lower still, and turned his face to the wall lest its paleness should show against the surrounding darkness and betray him. The nearness of the footsteps made his craven heart leap, and the pulses beat in his throat with deafening persistency. It seemed to him, as on his hands and knees he flattened

himself against the stonework, his face striving to bury itself in a crevice, as though the footsteps suddenly diverged from their path straight up the breast of the hill, and turned off at such an angle as would inevitably bring them sooner or later into his immediate neighbourhood. Of this, however, he could not be sure, for he dare not lift his head in order to see which way the intruder was really coming.

But a few seconds sufficed to prove to him that his surmise had been correct, and that the footsteps were moving not only in a direct line toward him, but, or so he judged from the sound, could now be but half a dozen yards from the place where he lay. Should he remain where he was, he debated hurriedly with himself, or should he at once spring to his feet, and in the event of the intruder proving to be one of the Derthwaite keepers, a fact which Neddy could scarcely doubt, leap over the wall and let him, if he chose, give chase. The latter seemed the better plan, for Neddy was light on his feet and

would probably elude the keeper; but it was uncertain, if he waited until the man had his hand on his collar, how the matter might end.

As Neddy arrived at this conclusion, he gave a swift glance at the man who was approaching the place where he lay concealed in order to judge how he could best escape detection; and he hurriedly debated whether he should spring at once to his feet and over the wall, or stooping double in its shadow for a dozen yards and then clamber over and drop down at the other side. But when he recognized Matthew, for it was the blacksmith who had disturbed Neddy Kendal in his preparations for poaching, he instantly changed his plans, and determined instead of trying to get away, that he would remain concealed as long as possible. For if the worst came to the worst and Matthew recognized him, he could tell the blacksmith that he had better hold his tongue about it, for one had as much right to be in the wood as the other.

Matthew came steadily toward the wall,

directing his steps a few yards above the place where the shoemaker lay. He was walking with his head erect, and his eyes fixed straight before him in a vacant stare. He did not so much as glance at the patch of fading brackens which partially hid the crouching figure. When he got to the wall, he sought with his foot for a projecting stone by which he could climb, after which he raised himself to the top of it, where he remained motionless for a moment on one knee before dropping down upon the other side.

It was but a moment that the moon shone fully upon the face which was unsheltered by the brim of an ordinary hat; but in that moment Neddy had given a furtive glance from his hiding place, and had marked with a feeling of astonishment, its ghastly pallor, noticing also a dark stain that was plainly visible at the corner of the mouth, together with a swelling of one side of the upper lip. Then, as he lowered his eyes, he caught sight of the torn jacket.

At the same instant the eyes of the blacksmith, with their widely-opened lids and stony expression, were lowered suddenly to Neddy's upturned face; a sudden flash of recognition, not of the individual, but of the fact that a man lay there in hiding, passed into them. With a momentary pause of startled fear Matthew peered down at it; and then hurriedly, and as if he would have it understood that nothing beyond the stone wall with its shadow and cluster of bracken had been seen by him, dropped out of sight.

Listening to the sound of Matthew's retreating footsteps, the soft swish of the brackens as the strong man pressed through them, and the swinging back of the mountain-ash where its branches had been held aside for him to pass, occupied for a time the whole of Neddy's attention. But as the sounds grew fainter, his thoughts became divided between sickening speculations of doubt and fear concerning the possibility of his having been recognized

by the blacksmith, and vague wonderings upon the strange appearance of Matthew's face.

Neddy knew well enough that, even if the blacksmith had recognized him as he lurked behind that wall in the Derthwaite wood, no mention of such a suspicious fact would be made in the village; neither would Matthew at any time be likely to taunt or threaten him with his knowledge of it. But what Neddy did fear, and from which he shrank almost as much as from the thought of any open accusation that Matthew might make, was, that he would have to face the blacksmith's steady eye, and see in its calm expression the accusation of his own wrongdoings. He had always liked to be able to throw his petty insults at the blacksmith; but if Matthew had recognized him he could no longer do this. Altogether he felt bitterly chagrined and mortified, that of all men in the village, Matthew Tindale should have been the one to see him where he lay hidden.

Still, there was the bare chance that Matthew had not recognized him after all, and Neddy clung to this hope until it became almost a certainty; arguing with himself, that if his face had been clearly seen amid the surrounding shadows surely Matthew would have called him by name, or passed a word with him about the night. Some men would have been churlish with Neddy after his many bickering speeches, but this would have been foreign to Matthew's nature, and Neddy knew it.

Gradually the shoemaker's doubts and fears were laid aside, and he began speculating upon the strange appearance of Matthew's face. No satisfactory reason suggested itself for the pallor, the swelling, and the dark streak on the side of the mouth. Had Matthew been one of Neddy's companions, the shoemaker would have had a dozen explanations, any one of which might have held good. Neddy hated the blacksmith, and never lost an opportunity of injuring or insulting him; yet

he could not connect deeds with him in the secrecy of his own heart, which he knew to be out of keeping with his character; he could only do that with his lips.

So, crouching beneath the shelter of the wall, Neddy puzzled himself about the strange disfigurement of the blacksmith's face, until the last faint sound of moving branches and the snapping now and again of a twig died away, when he laid his speculations aside, and, rising cautiously to his feet, peered over the wall, his eyes fixed upon that part of the wood where, judging from the sound, Matthew had disappeared.

Satisfied at length that nothing was to be feared just then from the blacksmith's presence, he once more went down on his knees, and completed the setting of the snare. This done, he took off his hat, and looked at a curl of brass wire which lay temptingly to his hand. But his nerves had been terribly shaken during those minutes when he had been obliged to listen to the sound of the unknown footsteps;

and he had become dispirited by the bitter annoyance, which he was forced to undergo, at the thought of being discovered in so questionable a position by the man he hated more than any other in the world—hated, perhaps, most bitterly, because if loud in defamatory epithets of him, he was yet unable to hold him despised in his heart.

No, he did not care about having any more sport that night. So he put his hat on, and, after looking round cautiously on every side, began to pick his way almost silently through the wood, so careful was he to avoid the brackens that would rustle when touched, or any branches that would have to be pushed aside. About every twenty paces he paused to listen, his eyes glancing with quick furtive looks upon every object that suggested the figure of a man. He was not thinking so much of Matthew as of the gamekeepers; the former, he felt certain, by the steady pace at which he had been going, did not mean to linger in the wood, and by this time must

have reached the public road, for which he appeared to be aiming ; but when he got into the road itself, his fears once more centred round Matthew. If the keepers were to meet him there, they could have nothing to say to him ; it was only Matthew who might put two and two together, and connect him with the man whom he had seen crouching behind the wall.

And so it was, that not until he heard the sound of a hammer striking on the smithy anvil, and allowed himself calmly to remember that the elder Tindale rarely worked after the usual hour for closing, that he considered himself tolerably safe in the full moonlight, and stepped from beneath the last broad shadow that fell upon the road.

But when he came to the smithy, he kept as far from it as possible, and with hurried slouching gait, stooped so that his head might not appear above the hedge, his eyes, meanwhile, turning first upon the red

glow which filtered between the joints of the shutters, and then upon the broad stream of light that, coming from the open doorway, widened and spread itself up the slightly rising bank that ran in front of the smithy. Here he doubled up his fist, and shook it threateningly, muttering something between his teeth which sounded like a curse ; and as he did so, there was a sudden cessation of the sharply ringing blows, and the shadow of the occupant of the smithy crossed the stream of light.

Instantly Neddy loosened his clenched fist, and stopped in the middle of his sentence, his weak body bending almost double in its endeavour to keep itself concealed, his legs hurrying fast into the friendly shadows of a neighbouring cottage, where he paused to let the cowardly blood cool itself again within his veins.

And then the blows of the hammer began to ring again upon the anvil, and Matthew, with haggard and drawn face, forged and welded

another link in the chain that lay about his feet, while sweat that did not come from physical labour, stood in great drops upon his cheeks.





BOOK V.

CHAPTER I.

NEMESIS.

It was Sunday afternoon—the day following that which had seen the fatal struggle on the cliff—an afternoon as various in its moods as any that might be found in the fickle month of April. At one time the sunshine filled the valley, and delicately outlined the distant hills in light and shade ; at another a massive bank of cloud rose in the north and spread itself over the sky, blotting out the sun. Then the wind would come and send it rolling away to the southern horizon ; and there would be another flood of sunshine, and then again the

collecting of another bank of cloud. At length there came one long broad mass of sullen grey that covered up the blue sky, and although the wind drove against it and fretted its flank, it could not disperse it as it had done the other clouds, but only parted its huge mantle for a little while, the rift closing as suddenly as it came. After this more clouds gathered, until there was no possibility of the wind making headway against them; then it crept quietly back into its caverns, leaving the grey clouds to drop their tears undisturbed. And their mist-like veils swept across the valley and thickened until the hills were blotted out. And now came a fall of moisture so soft and gentle as scarcely to be termed rain, upon the meadows, trees, and hedges; the minute globules gradually changing their character and increasing in size, until the dust upon the roads was laid and the rough sandstone walls were covered with long wet splashes.

The terrace at Derthwaite became moist and

glistening ; and the row of tall hollyhocks, whose heads just peeped above the outer edge of the terrace from the shrubbery below, were beginning to droop and gather tiny reservoirs of water among their leaves. The broad discs of the sunflowers, blackened a little by the frosts, were inverted, and the rain dripped from their heavy calyxes ; and the border flowers, time-stained and worn, became over-weighted and were pressed down into the soil.

A melancholy outlook across that garden and valley. The rain splashed against the windows and trickled down them, as though to blur and render it more indistinct to the eyes that ever and anon peered out anxiously as though in search of something.

Upon the road leading to Staneby tiny streams had begun to form, and were trickling in the cart-ruts or in the narrow scooped-out pathway made by the horses' feet ; and every stalk of grass that grew by the roadside had shaped itself into a minute conduit by which the rain was directed to its root ; and the

tender blades were beginning to be bent, softened, and crushed down. The cottage eaves in Staneby were dripping, and where the rain had begun to trickle in miniature falls, careful housewives had placed pitchers or wooden pails.

A melancholy afternoon, saving for those who had happiness in their hearts.

Not a straggler—man, woman, or child—was to be seen on the village green; and most of the cottage doors were closed, and if one could judge from the curls of smoke from the chimneys, fires burned upon many hearths. Only Mrs. Tindale ventured to brave the weather; and, with a little shawl thrown over her Sunday cap in order to protect it from the rain, stood within her doorway, while she stretched her head out as far as possible to look up the road and then across the green.

“I cannot tell whatever should have taken her out on sec a like afternoon,” she was saying. “An’ all her good clo’es on, just as fresh as when she got them for uncle Mark’s funeral!

But she's very contrary, is Maggie, when she's got a thing of her head, very—I must say that mysel. I don't believe ye wad turn her, not if she saw a wild bull in her way."

All this was said while Mrs. Tindale's head projected beyond the doorway, therefore but little of it was heard by the occupants of the cottage. But it did not matter much, for a listener was not a very important thing in Mrs. Tindale's economy.

"Did ever I see sec a day!" she continued. "Why, it's raining for all the world just like Noah's Ark!" Then after a pause she added vehemently, "Sec a nasty messy thing rain is—it's a pity but what there was another way o' watering t' earth. It's what I call a wiffly thing; ye never know where ye hev't—whippin' in here and there, no matter if ye hev yer clogs on an' an umbrella. I don't believe in an umbrella mysel—it's all drips. Give me a good shawl to put at t' top o' my bonnet."

With these words Mrs. Tindale came in and shut the door, stamping her feet and shaking

herself just as though she had stepped beyond the threshold into the rain, and had walked in her carpet slippers through one of the pools that were slowly gathering in the road.

“What is it ye’re fashin’ (troubling) yersel about?” asked old Jonathan Tindale, rousing himself from a nap, and looking at her from under the corners of his red pocket-handkerchief which was spread over his head.

“Nay, bless yer heart! I isn’t fashin’ mysel. The lass has a right to go out a bit if she likes.”

“Where hes she gone to?”

“I don’t know, unless it’s up to Derth’aite about some stockings that she’s been knittin’ for Mrs. Peacock. Did she tell ye where she was goin’, Mattha? I heard you and her speakin’ together just afore she went out.” And Mrs. Tindale turned to her son.

Matthew was sitting on the settle that had been drawn up from the window to one side of the fire, his head drooping over his chest, and his eyes fixed vacantly upon a copy of

the *Merton Advertiser*. His back was turned upon his mother; and although he started when she spoke to him, he did not look round nor alter his position in any way; he only moved his hand with a slow unsteady action, and smoothed the paper he appeared to be reading.

“Mattha, my lad! hev ye fallen asleep? Ye’ve sat very near all day ower that paper. Wake up, an’ tell us what’s come o’ Maggie.”

“I don’t know, mother. I can’t tell ye.” And Matthew’s bloodshot eyes lifted themselves for one moment to look into blank space, and then sank back again to the printed sheet, of which during the whole day he had never read a word.

Matthew knew it was raining. He had been sitting listening to its faint patter against the window, and the hissing which its heavier drops made as they fell into the fire. He had sat for the last half-hour listening to nothing else—listening to it, and thinking how it would beat out the traces of foot-

steps upon the plateau. And he had drunk in the sound as greedily as a thirsting man will drink from the muddied waters of a pool scarce deep enough to cover his flattened hand. "Go on raining," he kept saying to himself with the inward wrestling of one who strives in prayer. But Matthew was not praying, or at least not consciously praying; the blank chill which falls upon one who stands outside a door at night in all the fury of a winter storm had come upon his soul. He felt himself to be alone in the universe; alone, with the grip of two hands upon his wrists, and the cry of one appealing to the Deity in his death-hour for help.

All that morning his mind had fixed itself with painful tension upon the plateau which had seen the struggle of the previous night. How did it look under the glaring light of day? Was the grass upon it broken and trodden down? Was the earth ruffled and upturned? Were the rocks——Bah! to think of that which might be upon them—to imagine

the marks made by that scraping and rasping—was torture and agony! And back again his thoughts would go to the short grass, the sand which lay in patches, and the bramble-bushes that bordered each side of the plateau.

And then the rain had begun to fall, and brought momentary lessening of the uneasiness. For instead of seeing bruised and trodden-down grass, and sand that showed across its surface the marks of fingers which had vainly endeavoured to smooth it as the wind does with velvety hands, he saw the rain refreshing with its cooling drops each tender blade, and falling with its steady patter upon the furrowed surface of the sand that slipped grain by grain into one level; while upon the scarred and rasped edges of the cliff——

But a horror of sounds began to fill the air—sounds that told of men breathing hard, and of feet that were firmly planted on footholds that gave way with sudden raspings and grindings; and his thoughts were

driven back from the point that they had touched.

Now it was, that with an increase of inward delirium he renewed his cries that the heavens might rain ; might loose their sluices ; might burst their reservoirs ; might descend and beat upon and deluge that plateau.

But as men carrying a burden will change its position that the galled shoulder may find ease, so did Matthew turn his thoughts at times from these things to the man whom he had seen skulking behind the wall in the Derthwaite wood. He was troubled about the possibility of his having been recognized by him. He tried to picture himself as, crossing the wall, he had paused momentarily before swinging himself over, and wondered if it were possible that the moonlight had not been shining at that moment on his face. Shadow there could not have been from the brim of his hat, for on his return to the smithy he had found that he had gone out wearing his paper cap ; but might he not have had his

head in such a position that his face would have been in shadow as he paused for that one moment? He tried to believe it possible, nevertheless doubt of its possibility persistently pressed itself upon him.

Again, if the man, whoever he was, had recognized him, would he not tell it in the village, and say how he had seen Matthew Tindale making his way home through the Derthwaite woods on the night of young Mr. Aschenburg's disappearance?

This question that could not answer itself merged into another: Who was that man who had lurked in hiding behind the wall?

Each time this question came before him, Matthew shrank with the abject fear of one whose physical nature is threatened with extreme pain. He abhorred the man, whom he believed himself to have recognized, in spite of the deep shadows and the overhanging branches; and to have to stand continually before him, knowing that the man could, if the scales of ignorance were moved from his

eyes, glare up at him and drop another link in the chain from Sidney Aschenburg dead to Matthew Tindale living, galled his proud nature. To have to meet this man daily, and be compelled to hear silently his petty speeches of insult and rivalry ; to know that he could no longer look clear-eyed into his face ; to feel that he, the man whose life had been proudly held between the guiding lines of duty and honour, must now confess himself undone, and fit only to be trodden beneath the feet of him whom he despised, was to Matthew as the searing of a red-hot iron upon his brain. From henceforth he must regard himself as beneath the very man whom he had considered lowest in the world. The two had changed places. The nobler-natured man had sunk into the deeper guilt, while the servile and contemptible one now stood upon a higher rung of the ladder. As was the daily life of the one, so must now the daily life of the other be barricaded and furnished with a strong array of lies ; each expression of face,

each word that dropped from Matthew's lips, each hasty action of his hand, must be propped up with dishonest meaning.

When Mrs. Tindale turned abruptly upon Matthew and asked him that question about his sister, he was writhing beneath the knowledge of his crime—starting from it as a horse frenzied with bit and spur will rise in sudden revolt against its rider. There was a wild beating of soul against the inevitable, and an agonized quailing of his manhood; a flinching from the knowledge of that which could never be undone.

At the mention of his sister, sweat such as had stood on his face when he forged the chain on the previous night, once more broke out upon him. He knew where she had gone. He knew how at that moment she would be standing in the familiar quarry. For when Maggie had come to him that morning to ask the result of his pleading for her at Derthwaite, he had replied evasively and with trembling lips, that Mr. Sidney Aschenburg and he

had met and quarrelled. For the first time in his life he had roughly pushed her from him. Then she told him of the meeting which Mr. Sidney Aschenburg had suggested should take place with her in the quarry wood, and he had not answered her, but had turned his head lest she should see the expression which he knew was coming into his face. The nails had bitten into the horny palms, as he thought how she would have to stand and wait for the lover who would never come.

After his mother had spoken to him, he made a greater feint of reading, for he wanted to be left undisturbed; so turning the newspaper inside out, he drew the corner of the settle on which he was seated somewhat nearer the fire.

“Ay, that’s right, my lad.” And Mrs. Tindale, forgetful for the moment of Maggie and of the rain, began to busy herself about the hearth. “Stretch out yer legs,” she continued, “an’ push them forward where they’ll get well into t’ heat. I’ll move t’

poker an' then ye can push them about as ye will."

Matthew put out his legs in obedience to her suggestion ; but because he had not placed them just in the position which she thought best, Mrs. Tindale stooped and lifted first one and then another, carefully putting them down where she believed the heat from the fire would be most felt. Then she straightened herself, and placing her hands on her broad hips, looked down with an air of pride upon this her firstborn.

She was dressed in her Sunday gown of black stuff, its bodice gathered in thick plaits across her bosom, while its short skirts showed her feet in their gaily-coloured carpet slippers. The smile upon her lips had broken away and was rippling over every feature ; her eyes had caught it up, and the cheeks had risen plump and round beneath the lower lids.

"Ye're a grand man, Mattha," she suddenly exclaimed. "I dare warrant there isn't another such as you t' whole Fell side round."

An expression of deepest pain crossed the son's face ; but he made no answer, not so much as even by the raising of his eyes.

“ When folks says to me sometimes, ‘ I wonder why your Mattha doesn't wed,’ I just laugh to mysel and keep quiet, for it wouldn't be manners to tell them what's in my mind.”

“ What is in yer mind, mother ? ” And Matthew moved wearily, his head still drooping.

“ Why, my lad, there isn't a lass in Staneby, or for the matter of that in the whole country side, that's fit to be yer mate.” Mrs. Tindale chuckled complacently, and began rubbing one hand over the other until her wedding-ring sparkled.

“ I don't know, mother.” And there was a momentary lightening of Matthew's burden as his thoughts went vaguely to pretty Bella Hind. He was not connecting her in any way with himself : that would have brought pain, and was to come later.

“ Not but what there's plenty in t' village—

my word!—that wad jump for ye. There's Tilly Davis is never done looking at ye round t' pillar in church. She thinks I don't see her; but, loave me, I wad be as blind as a bat if I didn't. An' there's Bessy Armstrong, that's always pretending she likes me so well that she must come up of an evening just to hev a chat with me. A chat with me, indeed! when, as soon as ever you come in, she never turns so much as a word out o' the side of her mouth at me. An' I've come lately to think that Bella Hind has brighter roses on her cheeks when she comes past here——”

“Whisht, whisht, mother! You talk an' I talk, an' mebbe neither of us hes any meaning in our words.” Here Matthew flung down the newspaper, and, rising from his seat, stretched his arms above his head with the gesture of a man wrestling with weariness and pain.

Mrs. Tindale was not generally observant; she was too good-humoured, too much taken

up with smiles and the easy flow of her own feelings to mark very closely those of others ; but she noticed the expression of intense pain upon her son's face, and it slightly changed the current of her thoughts. Could it be that, after all, she had made a mistake about Tilly Davis, or about Bessy Armstrong ; and that perhaps the one peeped round the pillar in church because Matthew was known to look that way as often, or that the other liked to come in an evening to see the mother just because the son could enjoy a chat ? Or was it Bella Hind who was the chosen one ? She had seen her many a time lately waving her hawthorn stick toward the smithy.

And here Mrs. Tindale moved her feet uneasily, the crimson and green toes alternately playing a tattoo upon the floor. Surely the little jade—for so she called her in her sudden resentment—was not playing herself off with airs on Matthew !

“ You don't mean to say, my lad, that you an' Bella Hind—— ”

“Mother, I’m not going to wed. I’ve never asked any woman to keep company with me, an’ I never will ; so set yer heart at rest.”

Matthew’s clenched fist came down heavily on the back of the settle, and he swung round on his heel, looking with dazed eyes out of the window. He had just remembered that he had promised to go and have a pipe that very evening with Bella’s father ; and the throb of pleasure which he had felt in the making of the promise was now, on its remembrance, turned into a sting of agony. Then it came to his mind that he had a part to play, and, an expression of endurance settling on his face, he turned once again to his mother and made some trifling remark.

They talked together for a little while upon indifferent subjects, when Mrs. Tindale referred suddenly to the bruise on her son’s lip.

“I can’t think howiver ye did sec a like thing,” she said. “Yer father niver gev

hissel a bat in t' face like that all t' years I've known him."

"The iron jumped up and caught me there." And Matthew laid his hand across his lip as he spoke; but his eyes fell before his mother's.

"Yer father's hed a spark in his eye sometimes, or a bit of a burn on his finger or his arm. But yer father hes great providence" (Mrs. Tindale meant "confidence") "in himself, an' I dare say that hes something to do with his never coming to any hurt." Here she broke off suddenly, exclaiming, "My word! there's Maggie, wi' her Sunday clo'es soaked through an' through."

The door opened almost as she spoke, and the girl entered, with garments that dripped from every point upon the threshold.

Then followed a great deal of bustling on the part of Mrs. Tindale. The wet umbrella had to be shaken at the door; the wet jacket pulled off the gown that was damp beneath; the garments felt, in order that it might be

ascertained how far they had partaken in the general soaking—Mrs. Tindale talking volubly all the time.

“Eh, my lass, it’ll be a chance if ye don’t get yer death o’ cold,” she was saying. “I think ye’d better take yerself off to bed, an’ I’ll bring ye something warm. Why, yer very hands are like death.”

“I think mebbe I had,” returned the girl wearily. “I feel all of a heat, and yet I’m cold; an’ there are pains in my bones, an’ my head aches.” As she said the last words her eyes were lifted to her brother’s face.

But Matthew had to turn his head aside. For the deep melancholy gaze, which was meant only to reproach him for driving a lover away from keeping his appointment in the quarry wood, cried out to him with the reproachful despair of a creature undone.

Later in the evening the rain ceased falling. Then a rift came in the grey covering of the sky that was scarcely larger than a man’s hand, and slowly the soft masses of cloud

rolled back, until a few stars could be seen faintly shining, when there was a sudden broadening of the cleared expanse toward the eastern hills, and the moon rose clear and bright. The leaves of the trees still dripped, and there was a soft gurgling sound on the fields where the soil was drinking in the moisture with eager lips ; and the waters that had gathered at the sides of the roads “made believe” that they were real brooks, and clapped their little hands and danced over the stones just as though they had been the time-honoured streams of meadows and woodlands.

Old Jonathan Tindale lifted up the blind once or twice and remarked upon the change in the weather. But Matthew did not answer him ; for he, Matthew Tindale, who had never cared for wind nor rain, did not want to know that the night was fine ; for had he not pacified himself with the thought that the weather would be a sufficient excuse for his not going to have a pipe, according to arrange-

ment, with Bella's father? He felt he could not go; he would never find voice to speak to Bella, and he would never be able to meet her eyes with anything like composure.

They were sitting round the fire, the three of them—old Jonathan, Mrs. Tindale, and Matthew; Maggie was in bed. The old man, with his arm-chair of rudely carved oak and its knitted cushion, drawn close to one side of the fire, his red handkerchief spread over one knee; his dark eyes looking from under their shaggy brows at the blazing wood; his shoulders nestling closer than usual under the fringe of white hair which bordered his head; while his twisted and distorted hands beat a tattoo upon the arms of his chair. From time to time he lifted up his eyes to the son, who was sitting opposite to him in the corner of the settle, and then to the comely, upright figure of his wife, who, with folded arms across her bosom, had drawn her chair up to the centre of the hearth.

“What's that?” exclaimed Mrs. Tindale

suddenly, one ear turned in the direction of the window. But, before any answer could be made, some one rapped on the door, and almost at the same moment pressed down the latch and admitted himself.

Matthew had looked at his mother when she spoke ; and, when the rap came upon the door, had started from the corner of the settle, clutching at the seat with a nervous gesture of the hands.

It was Bill Taylor of the long legs who had thus unceremoniously admitted himself. He did not wait to close the door behind him, but in his lounging awkward way stepped with signs of excitement across the floor, looking straight at Matthew, who, as hastily as he had sat erect in his seat, now dropped back into such shadow as the corner of the room afforded.

“ There’s a stir down at Tom Farrar’s,” he cried excitedly. “ Won’t ye come ? I came o’ purpose thinkin’ ye wadn’t like to miss ’t. T’ watter watcher ’s just come in with a story

queer enough to set yer hair on end. He says, mebbe above two hours an' a half since, he was coming along the side o' Derthwaite meadows, just where t' willow branches sweep into t' watter, when he sees something light-coloured amongst them, bobbing up an' down. He says he doesn't know why he stopped an' looked, for he sees many a thing stickin' in branches as he goes along of his walks. Anyway he did stop, an' he tried to haul it out with his stick, an' at last he did get it out, an' he finds as it's a hat."

During this recital Matthew's hand, which had laid hold of the settle cushion, gradually loosened the tenacity of its grasp, until it hung lax and powerless at his side.

"Well," continued Bill Taylor, coming nearer to the little circle in his excitement, and looking now at Mrs. Tindale's upturned face of astonishment, now at old Jonathan's, whose dark eyes eagerly watched each movement of the narrator. "He wrings t' watter out o' t' hat, an' isn't so very long before he

sees whose it is, for there isn't many about Staneby 'at wad wear sec a hat. Well, says he to hisselt, it's Mr. Sidney Aschenburg's, if ever he hed a hat. An' so he thinks he had better take it right away to Derthwaite. When he gets there he hands it in"—here Bill Taylor paused, as though he had reached a point in his story—"hands it in, I say; an' he says how he's got it, an' how he's found it. And then t' chap that gets it from him, says, ye'd better wait till I take it to Mr. Aschenburg—mind he said *Mr.* Aschenburg, not Mr. Sidney Aschenburg—for mebbe he'd like to see ye. Well, it isn't so very many minutes before Mr. Aschenburg comes hisselt with the hat in his hand, an' he asks all manner of questions; if he had seen it when he walked along there in the forenoon? an' if it had got under t' branches from t' watter side or t' land side? Parker said he never hed sec a lot o' questions put to him, excepting when he was afore t' magistrates. An' then Mr. Aschenburg talks on for a long

time, an' Parker said he saw all t' time how his hand that he kept pushing his spectacles on with was shaking. An' at last Mr. Aschenburg said, that now as he had seen that hat, an' as Mr. Sidney had been away all night, he began to be afraid there was summat wrang. An' Parker said he thought there was something wrang too. An' by this time, all t' men that iver they hed about t' place was listenin'—a good bit off, ye understand—to what Parker an' Mr. Aschenburg was sayin'. Well, by this time that chap, him 'at 's Mr. Sidney's own man, comes up when Mr. Aschenburg isn't looking, an' he says right off, before any one had time to ask him to speak, either Parker or Mr. Aschenburg, how 'at Mr. Sidney had been very strange when he was travellin' away from home, racin' just as if he was mad, an' was that queer to do with—but he never got no further said, for Mr. Aschenburg gave a look through his spectacles that sent him back to t' others pretty sharp. Well, when Parker gets Mr.

Aschenburg to hisself again, he recommends him to hev t' watter dragged ; for, says he, it'll do no harm if it does no good ; an' if Mr. Sidney's lying a corpse at t' bottom, he would be a deal comfortabler an' it would be a deal better for him if he was on his own bed."

Here the sound of a faint groan came from the corner in which Matthew was sitting ; and there was a sudden movement as if he were going to rise to his feet, then it was checked, and he dropped once more into his old position.

"Ay, it's a bad job, isn't it?" exclaimed Bill Taylor, looking sympathetically at the corner in which he could dimly discern the features of the young blacksmith. "I make no doubt of it, he's tumbled over some of those nasty bits going along the fisherman's path there. But if ye're goin' to come, Mattha, let's away ; for the chaps were sayin' they wad go down to t' watter side to see if they could see anything of him just as I left t' Garod Arms."

“Ay, Mattha; away with thur.” And old Jonathan rose from his chair with something of the tremulous eagerness of the old hunter, when it pricks up its ears at the well-known bay of the hounds. “Away with thur, my lad. T’ whole village ’ll be out, I reckon, an’ me amang them if I hedn’t a son to take my place. I could do ’t well enough; it isn’t for that.”

“Yes, Mattha. Just think of his mother, poor body. An’ her as proud as proud.” Mrs. Tindale had risen from her chair in her excitement and had laid her hand on her son’s shoulder. “Get away with Bill Taylor, an’ I’ll sit up for ye, for I’ll be as anxious for news as anybody. Dear, dear, such a fine young man. An’ as handsome as he could walk.”

Matthew’s limbs trembled under him, and he stooped, as if to gain time, to pick up a small faggot that had fallen from the grate, and as he did so the fire shone full upon the bruised lip and cheek.

Bill Taylor was watching him impatiently, and as Matthew raised himself, his eyes mechanically followed that mark which the firelight had shown.

“Come, Mattha, I’se afraid we’ll be t’ last,” he cried; and, turning toward the door, moved his shambling feet with a swiftness that seemed to have in it something of an endeavour to communicate his own impatience to the blacksmith.

And Matthew followed, with the sound of a sea whirling about his ears; his hand groping, as though no sight guided it, after his hat which hung on a nail in the wall.





CHAPTER II.

THE VERDICT.

IT was eight o'clock in the evening. The floor in the kitchen at the Garod Arms had been newly sanded, the hearth lately brushed up, and half a scuttle of coals thrown into the wide grate that now gleamed with leaping flames and jets of gas that puffed out between every bar. A round table stood in front of the fire, bright and shining with real old-fashioned elbow polish, a few dark circles showing where ale-glasses had been allowed to drain. The brass candlesticks on the mantelpiece, which were kept there solely for ornament, and the two large white china dogs and the church of the same ware, glinted with

sharp touches of light under the brightness of a lamp suspended close to the ceiling ; for the ceiling was low, and it was necessary to have the lamp hanging where no unsteady arm nor head could easily reach it.

A larger circle of men than usual was gathered round the fire ; larger even than might be seen on frosty nights in winter, when it was thought economy by some to go to the Garod Arms and have a pipe and a glass of ale, in order to save their own coal and lights. Of course the regular customers were there ; but besides these, there were many who seldom availed themselves of the cheer to be found at the Garod Arms, and whose readiness to turn in for that one night, at all events, was clearly due to their impatience to hear all that was to be said about the finding of young Aschenburg's remains, and the doings at the coroner's inquest, which had been held that afternoon.

It was Saturday night, just a week since the young squire had been thrown over the cliff,

and the excitement which had been awakened in the village by the news that he was missing, and that his hat had been found floating on the water in the Derthwaite meadows, had reached its highest point. During the first half of the week the Garod Arms had done but little trade; for the men who had not volunteered to drag for the body, had, when their day's work was over, taken the nearest way across field and hedge to the river, where the drags were being plied with strange zest. Even Tom Farrar, after standing many hours a day in his own doorway, had glanced up and down the village, and with a rapid turning over of the coppers in his pocket, had also taken the shortest path to the river, and walking busily up and down its banks had strained his sight to see into the middle of the stream, watching with a lengthening of his upper lip when the drags stuck fast in some bed of weeds or beneath a boulder. He took the stagnation in his business quietly, for he knew by experience, that the very cause of it would

by and by send customers in such a crowd to the Garod Arms, that he would wish the kitchen were twice the size, and that he were two hosts instead of one.

Saturday night was always reckoned by him as equal to two ordinary nights so far as profits were concerned ; and on this particular Saturday night, when the door opened again and again to admit customers, and Mrs. Farrar at last had to bring chairs out of the parlour, he began to think there might be as great a consumption of beer and tobacco as three ordinary nights could show. But when, after a slow and uncertain opening of the door, followed by the sound of mud being knocked from boots upon the doorstep, a sandy-haired, narrow-faced man, with a freckled complexion, came over the threshold, with the air of one who was unfamiliar with the place, Tom Farrar saw that so far as the proceeds of one night's convivial meeting at the Garod Arms could make a fortune, his was made.

“That's right, Mr. Dixon. Glad to see ye.

Fine evenin', sir," were the words that suddenly burst from his lips.

For this was no other than the man who had been the first to lay hold of the body of Sidney Aschenburg, when it was hauled into a boat from the deepest part of the river; and his coming to the inn—a man who so far as Tom Farrar knew had never before crossed its threshold—was a stroke of luck which filled the landlord's heart with pride and exultation.

"Come an' sit ye down," he continued, feeling that this was a guest to whom a little extra courtesy could be shown with safety. "Come an' take my seat, an' the missis 'll fetch me a chair into this corner."

"Not at all, not at all. Manners is manners." And Mr. Dixon dropped into a chair which Mrs. Farrar had dexterously placed behind him; for she thought her husband was seated to the greatest advantage so far as business was concerned, and she did not wish him to be disturbed.

There had been a general turning of heads

toward the new-comer, followed by a grating of chair legs on the sanded floor as every man moved a little closer to one of his neighbours—the breadth of a straw it might only be, but the ready way in which it was done testified how gladly each would have liked this distinguished guest to sit next to him, and also how heartily they wished to bid him welcome. The surprise felt at his sudden appearance had caused a general silence; but when Mr. Dixon had so far collected himself, for he was a shy man, as to be able to glance round at the circle of faces in the well-lighted kitchen, a chorus of voices broke in upon him, each desiring to be heard above the others and each persistently reiterating its own question.

“Ho’d yer noise, Neddy,” cried one, “ye shout in my ear just as if I was an ear-trumpet.”

“Yah!” snarled the shoemaker, in a prolonged note, “there’s none so ready to silence others as them ’at wants to talk theirsels.”

“Come, Mr. Dixon, I’ll stand treat,” were the words that now overcame in their turn the general din. “A glass o’ Mrs. Farrar’s best ale an’ a pipe o’ her best tobacco.”

“Nay, nay, I was on t’ bank side when he came up wi’ his boat load, an’ I’ll stand treat,” shouted another voice.

Here there was a scuffle between two men for the honour of sitting next to the favoured guest; and the bigger and more powerful man of the two, with a dexterous movement of his foot, pulled the chair from beneath his rival, sending him at the same time, with a well-directed blow of his fist, on to the ground.

This feat called forth a general roar of laughter, and drew the attention of those assembled from the narrow-faced man, who was sitting passively and making no attempt to join in the general confusion.

It was the village butcher, a round faced, rosy-cheeked fellow, who had been thus unceremoniously rolled to the ground; and as he got up rubbing his elbows and his knees,

and shaking the sand from his clothes, he laughed in a jovial good-tempered way and knocked off the hat of his opponent.

“Now, gentlemen, if ye please,” called Tom Farrar, with the readiness which he always showed to interrupt anything which might end in a quarrel, for nothing did his business more harm than ill-humour; “we’ll hev rader less noise, an’ more conversashin.” And, as if to enforce his words, he brought his fist down on the table with such force, that the ale rocked in the glasses that were upon it in miniature waves.

“Well, I’s e willin’,” grumbled Neddy Kendal, attempting to drink while he talked; “I’ve been wantin’ to get in a word aw’ this time.”

“Ye’ve thrust in many a hunderd,” remarked a man who was very fond of provoking the shoemaker’s wrath.

“Now, Mr. Dixon,” went on the landlord, intentionally deaf to these interpolations, but raising his voice with the manner of one who

intends to be listened to, "there's a few of us here 'at's very glad to see ye to-night—very glad; an' no humbug about it. We don't mean to set up ourselves as more curious than most folks; but I suppose there isn't one of us 'at wouldn't be glad to get a word first-hand about t' things that went on at Derth'aite this afternoon."

There was a universal murmur of assent, and a tasting of ale, and a wiping of mouths on the back of hands and on coat sleeves, then a general silence, broken only by lips that puffed out curls of tobacco-smoke.

Mr. Dixon was as silent as well as a shy man, and as Tom Farrar's ale had not yet had time to stir in him any desire for a show of rhetoric, he only nodded to the landlord, and then looked uncomfortably round the circle of men who were preparing, each in his own fashion, for the passing of an enjoyable evening.

Tom Farrar understood the position of affairs exactly, and, careful to keep the reins

of conversation in his own hands, went on talking, always addressing his narrow-faced guest, but moving his eyes from time to time round the circle of men, in order to keep them in subordination, as well as to put his most welcome customer at his ease.

“It’s a curious thing,” he was saying, “that young Mr. Aschenburg wasn’t found till late on Thursday forenoon, an’ such a lot ’o drags as they hed at work.”

“Ye see it was the curiousness o’ the place where we found him.” It was the longest sentence Mr. Dixon had ventured upon, but he was beginning to feel the glow of the ale in his veins.

“Ay. T’ Devil’s Pot ye mean?” returned the landlord, careful not to leave his customer stranded upon a solitary island of conversation.

“Yes, deep down ; right in under one o’ them rocks. I always said myself from the first, if he was to be found in t’ river, it would be there, just where they fall right back in shelves.” And here Mr. Dixon got so well

accustomed to the sound of his own voice, that he began to explain the position in which he had been sitting in the boat at the time the body was found ; and how, when the drags really laid hold of the object of their search, there had been no doubts felt as to what would be drawn from the depths of the black watery cavern over which they floated ; he had worked often before at the drags, he told them, and he had never yet been mistaken in the character of their burden.

Meanwhile a man came up to the door of the Garod Arms, and paused for a moment ; but, without putting a hand on the latch, or a foot on the step ; then he turned, treading lightly, as if desirous of being unheard : but no sooner had he reached the border of the village green, than he stopped again.

He lifted his face to the starlit sky, and looked long and steadily into its depths. For several minutes did he stand thus with up-turned face.

Twice had he crossed the road and the

narrow strip of green which lay between him and the door of the inn, and each time he had stopped abruptly, and had looked at the brightly lighted windows. Then a spirit of revolt had seized him, and he had turned away with the determination of seeking elsewhere silence and security. He knew exactly how the men would be sitting in the glow of lamp and firelight ; tobacco-smoke filling the air, and a sense of warmth and comfort pervading every corner of the kitchen. He knew that Tom Farrar would be in his leather-covered arm-chair, a long clay pipe in his hand, his double chin resting on the points of his collar, his long upper lip giving an air of heavy thoughtfulness to his face. He could see Mrs. Farrar moving like a wandering spirit outside the circle of chairs, tray and jug in hand, as, in spite of her husband's efforts, she joined in the conversation.

Here Matthew, for it was he, shuddered, and drew himself up suddenly, as though the thong of an iron whip had fallen across his

shoulders. What would be the subject of that conversation? Would it not be of the one thing which had occupied every mind for a week? And if so, what conjectures might they not be hazarding—conjectures, ay, but perhaps such conjectures as would image the realities, which from henceforth were to be inextricably interwoven with his life?

No, he would not go; he could not go and hear all that might be said. And yet not to go seemed to him as if it would proclaim his guilt. For what suspicions might not his absence on a Saturday night arouse? Was he not always to be seen on that particular night at the Garod Arms? And if on this night of all others, when suggestions would be rife concerning the way young Mr. Aschenburg met his death, and when there would be much weighing and considering of the verdict at the coroner's inquest, what if he alone were absent—for all would be there save those whom nothing would tempt across the threshold of the village inn?

Besides, there was another thing to be considered. If he were not present with those men in their vague surmisings, who would turn the pointing hand of suspicion away from him? Who would bid them remember that men fling themselves at times into the water to get rid of invisible burdens; or tell them of steep rocks, and of feet, however youthful and sure, that slip or turn aside from a path? Yes, he must go, lest unwittingly—he knew they would not do it willingly—lest unwittingly they wove meshes of condemnation about him, from which there could be no escape. And the same expression came upon Matthew's face, as it wore a week ago, when he forged a chain far on into the night. And then he turned and retraced his steps steadily to the inn.

“Why, here's Mattha at last,” called out half a dozen voices, as the blacksmith stepped from the darkness of the road into the brightness of the kitchen.

“Why min, we 'd given ye up,” “Come on, him 'at 's last gets t' best welcome,” “Eh,

Mattha, we thought ye hed a mind to go on grindin' money up there, instead o' flingin' away a few coppers on a glass of ale," were amongst some of the remarks with which he was greeted.

"Not too busy to hev my Saturday night pipe," he answered, trying to laugh as he stepped into the circle, where, with difficulty, room had been made for him.

"It's been a thrang day up at the smithy," he continued; and then—for somehow everything seemed now to him to require an excuse—"it's t' time o' year when there's a deal wantin' doin' wi' ploughshares an' sec like."

"It's been a busy day with most of us," returned the landlord, throwing out his chest with a sigh; adding, after taking a number of short whiffs from his pipe, "Here's Mr. Dixon, 'at's spent no idle time, I should reckon."

Matthew shrank involuntarily, for he had not until that moment noticed the man, whom he knew well enough to be he whose drag had laid hold of the dead body of his victim.

“He’s given us a deal o’ interestin’ conversashin,” continued the landlord; “an’ he’s made hissel very agreeable.”

The object of this eulogy looked shyly into vacancy before him, and pressed his outspread hands between his knees; while a general murmur of approbation broke out. One man who had refreshed himself with more than one glass of Tom Farrar’s ale, here shouted “Hip, hip, hooray,” breaking afterwards into the refrain of some popular song, knocking with his heels on the floor, and beating time with his fists, which he brought down with the force of a sledge-hammer on the table.

“Mind them glasses!” called Mrs Farrar’s shrill voice in the Bacchanalian’s ear; “them ’at brecks, pays.”

Then there followed signs of disapproval on the part of the company, cries of “Whisht,” and “That’ll do, we’ll take yer song afterwards, Tommy.” At length the disturber relapsed into silence which was

only broken at times by low mutterings of "no harm;" "like to 'joy myself's well's other folks;" until a prolonged snore told that the somnolent god had carried him off into enchanted regions.

"Well, as I was sayin', gentlemen, just when Mattha came in;" continued the landlord, for by this time the conversation which had proved of such deep interest to the customers at the Garod Arms had been resumed—"I was sayin' that it seems to me to be an uncommon queer thing that the verdict should hev been 'Found Drowned,' for such a gentleman as Mr. Sidney Aschenburg."

"Well now, what would ye hev said it should ha' been?" queried the rosy-faced butcher, his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat.

"'Accidentally Drowned,' of course. 'Found Drowned' is only for folks such as nobody knows anything about; tramps an' sec like."

"Ay, but who knows whether he was accidentally drowned?" returned the butcher.

“Ye mean it should ha’ been brought in ‘Suicide’?”

“Ay, of course; what else should I mean?”

Matthew here caught up his glass of ale and, contrary to his custom, never put it from his lips until he drained the last drop.

“There’s other things beside them ye’ve named.”

It was the shoemaker who now spoke, and his dark ferret-like eyes looked round at the faces of the company for signs of approval: for the sensation of curiosity, when it is likely to be gratified, is a pleasant one.

“An’ what do ye call them, Neddy?” asked several voices simultaneously, after which the silence of expectation fell upon the circle.

“Why, it might be murder.”

Such a thought had never entered Neddy Kendal’s mind until that moment, and even when he suggested it he did not seriously entertain it. The idea had occurred to him in much the same way as the wish is usually

father to the thought. "Murder against a person or persons unknown" would have been a more sensational verdict and therefore one more to the shoemaker's liking — hence it had risen to his lips, although he did not believe that it would have been the truthful one.

There was a momentary silence after Neddy's remark, the pipes being removed from several mouths in order that their owners might more easily look their astonishment; while others who were less emotional continued to smoke calmly, with their eyes opened rather wider than usual and fixed on the shoemaker. Presently first one and then another uttered exclamations of dissent; one man contemptuously telling Neddy that he was a fool, and that no coroner in his senses would have given such a verdict.

"Now then, I'll tell ye, I'll not be called a fool by no man, even if he's as big an' as ugly as ye." The shoemaker thrust his hands into his pockets as he said this, and nestling low

down in his chair, looked defiantly at the man who had just spoken.

“Come, come, if ye please gentlemen, order’s t’ rule in this place. Them ’at comes to words goes out an’ finishes on t’ green ;” called Tom Farrar, inflating his chest and making the circumference of his waistcoat larger.

“Wad ye be called a fool yersel ?” snarled Neddy, his eyes now turned with the ferocity of a wild cat upon the landlord.

“Nay, I wadn’t. But I’d let anybody call t’ coroner a fool if he liked. An’ that’s what Sam did, didn’t ye, Sam ?” And the landlord winked at the man whose contempt for Neddy’s opinion had been so indiscreetly shown, knowing that the eye which he brought into operation was turned away from the shoemaker.

The man addressed as Sam nodded and acquiesced gruffly.

Peace having thus been restored, the subject of the verdict was again taken up, and the narrow-faced man, whose presence that night

at the inn was of such account, asked Neddy what his reasons were for suggesting that "Murder" would have been a better verdict.

"Oh, several things," was the sententious answer, the shabbily dressed form nestling lower in the chair. Neddy had no precise evidence to bring in support of his theory, but like most vulgar minds he enjoyed the position, whether rightly his or not, of being in possession of knowledge that might be withheld or dispensed according to his pleasure.

Matthew had been silent after making his simple greetings on entering the inn, excepting once when very briefly he had asked Mrs. Farrar to bring him a second glass of ale—a thing which was unusual with him, for he was a remarkably abstemious man—and had replied to a pointless joke made by her, as she noticed the unsteadiness of the hand with which he lifted the glass from her tray. His face was unusually pale, and there was a strained look of nervous tension about the eyes and eyebrows; but his lip and cheek

had assumed their ordinary proportions, and the discolouration which had disfigured them at the beginning of the week had altogether disappeared. He had sat upright in his chair from the time he had first seated himself in it, his feet planted firmly on the ground, as though he were holding himself ready at any moment to spring to them, until it had been suggested by Neddy Kendal that "Murder" would have been a better verdict, when he edged his chair a few inches further out of the circle. He kept his eyes with their strained expression fixed on the shoemaker who was sitting opposite, dropping back into an attitude which seemed to denote that he took no particular interest in the conversation that was being carried on. But when the shoemaker said vaguely there were several things that led him to think the verdict should have been "Murder," Matthew once more sat upright, and holding the ale-glass, which rested on his knee, with a convulsive but tremulous clasp, remarked that it seemed to him easy to

account for Mr. Sidney Aschenburg's death. The fisherman's path was an awkward one at night, even to those who knew it well, and it was easy to miss it and take the single false step that would lead over the edge of the cliff.

"In the bright moonlight?" asked the shoemaker derisively.

"I've heard tell o' folk fallin' ower cliffs in daylight," returned Matthew, his lips and mouth so parched that it affected his utterance.

"It looks most like an accident, when he's found with a long trail of bramble in his hand," put in Tom Farrar. "Eh, Mr. Dixon, that's right—with a long trail of bramble, just as if he'd clutched it in fallin' ower?"

"Tight of his hand," quickly added Mr. Dixon, clenching his own freckled hand, and holding it out in illustration.

A feverish brightness came into the blacksmith's eyes, and he looked eagerly from the narrow-faced man to Tom Farrar, and then back to the narrow-faced man.

“I tell ye I’s sure it’s murder,” reiterated the shoemaker doggedly, not from any spirit of conviction, but from the pure love of contradicting others. In speaking he had fixed his gaze accidentally on Matthew’s face, and as he did so the blacksmith turned and looked at him.

Was there some emanation of thought from the mind of one man to the other, broken and fragmentary, and yet having power to awaken in each a distorted and faint reflection of itself? And was this furthered by some change in the expression of the blacksmith’s face, a keener look in the eyes of Neddy Kendal, which caused the former visibly to quail and shrink, while the latter wondered, in confused astonishment, if it were possible that Matthew Tindale was in any way connected with Mr. Sidney Aschenburg’s death. The idea came with such suddenness to Neddy that he was unable to grasp it fully, or rally round it any suspicious circumstances which he might call to mind in connection with Matthew and the

young squire of Derthwaite. One thing only at the moment was clear to him—it had only been when he persistently expressed his opinion concerning the verdict, that Matthew had been roused from an attitude of seeming indifference, and with an eagerness which differed from the quiet determination of the landlord and the other men who had opposed the opinion of the shoemaker, had thrown himself into the dispute. This for the present was enough for Neddy. Matthew seemed to have reasons of his own for strenuously opposing the very suggestion even of young Mr. Aschenburg having met his death through foul means, and therefore the shoemaker became animated with the desire to pursue the topic, and chuckled inwardly at the thought of having it in his power to be able thus to plague and vex the man who was constantly, or so he thought, setting himself above him. Later he would consider how and why the subject was of such evident interest to Matthew.

Meanwhile, the blacksmith was picturing

the scene in the Derthwaite wood at the moment when he climbed the wall. Had the moonlight shone in his face, and could Neddy have recognized him? he wondered. And as he asked himself this question, he endeavoured to meet the gaze of the man who was sitting opposite. But Matthew knew how a thickening cloud of agony and remorse was gathering on his brow, and that, in spite of every effort, a quick beating was beginning to make itself felt in his throat; and his eyes fell.

“Well now, I’ll give ye some o’ my reasons for thinkin’ it should ha’ been murder,” remarked Neddy, with the air of one conferring a favour, while he kept his attention on Matthew. “What, I wad like to know, hev ye to say about that cut on his temple? Doesn’t that look like queer work?”

“Why, min, the docters differed about how he got it. We heard that as soon as we heard t’ verdict,” called a voice from the further end of the kitchen.

“Ay, that we did.” And Tom Farrar took

his pipe from his mouth, and tightened up his lips at the corners with a satisfied expression. "We heard that this afternoon, and Mr. Dixon's told us what t' docters said, word for word, just as neat as if he was a book."

"He's likely got that cut I should say at t' bottom of t' river." It was Matthew who spoke, feeling for a moment his burden lightened by the weight of a straw, knowing as he did, that at all events the cut had not been caused directly by a blow from his hand.

"There was three docters, an' they all seemed as if they were mixed up a bit whether he had got it before he was in the water or after." It was Dixon who was speaking, and he was again listened to with wrapt attention. "They seemed to think, as far as I could mee out, that it must hev been after, or else why wad he hev such a ho'd on t' bramble branch? He'd fallen ower when he was right of his senses, don't ye see, for he wad ha' been fighting with his hands, an' not laying ho'd o' t' bramble

branches if he was likely to get a knock of his head by anybody. It's fair enough to me. There was only one docter 'at seemed to me to differ a bit from t' others, an' likely enough he wasn't as clever as t' rest."

"I should think, Mr. Dixon, ye're right." And the blacksmith sickened as he said this, for in the space of a moment he lived again through that struggle with Sidney Aschenburg.

Neddy watched his victim narrowly, and then said, "Ye seem terribly anxious that he shouldn't ha' been murdered, Mattha. I didn't know you an' him were such partic'lar friends."

"It would be such a job as never was heard of!"

It was the blacksmith who said this; but no one seemed to wonder at the remark, nor to notice the way in which he passed one hand over his face, holding it pressed down tightly upon the eyelids for a moment, no one at least but Neddy. It seemed to those

present, that it would have been a horrible thing if a young man like Sidney Aschenburg were suddenly struck down by the hand of a murderer; and they sympathized with what the blacksmith said.

“Who wad hev been likely to do sec a thing?” questioned the rosy-faced butcher, after the momentary silence, which had followed upon Matthew’s ejaculation.

Matthew moved uneasily on his chair; the air of the kitchen was suffocating him, and he could feel once more the clasp of hands that convulsively held his own.

“Folks in Mr. Sidney Aschenburg’s position sometimes hev enemies,” remarked Neddy, feeling from want of knowledge he could only strike vaguely at his victim.

“Who’s likely to think badly of him, I’d like to know? He was a rare un for taking up first one thing an’ then another; but he could give as pleasant a ‘good day’ as any man,” persisted the butcher.

“I don’t know,” laughed Neddy, his eyes

gleaming with malicious pleasure, as he still watched the blacksmith from beneath his eyebrows. "Perhaps you, perhaps me, perhaps Mattha, for what any of us know."

"If anybody is to be reckoned an enemy of his, I should say it's you, Neddy," drily remarked the man who had called him a fool a little time back. "We all know it's not so very long since you hed a few of his hares."

This was a turn in the conversation upon which the shoemaker had not reckoned, and with that remarkable swiftness of thought which belongs peculiarly to the deepest forms of cunning, he doubled and turned upon what he had said. It flashed upon him in a moment, that if Matthew were able to say that he had seen him on the night of Mr. Sidney Aschenburg's disappearance in the Derthwaite woods, instead of being able to tease and annoy Matthew, he might find that he had set such a train of suspicious thoughts loose in men's minds as might in the end fasten upon himself.

"It's only one of my jokes," he exclaimed,

letting his eyes fall as if by chance on Matthew's face, in order that he might see the effect of his last throw in a losing game. "It's only a joke ; for I saw it vexed Mattha, an' I liked to see him look just as if I'd shaken a rope in his face."

The blacksmith was sitting white and motionless, his lips compressed, his eyes fixed in a rigid stare upon the speaker. And it was not until Neddy's last words died away, and there followed a silence due in part to the surprise which the blacksmith's extraordinary manner called up, that Matthew summoned sufficient self-command to say unsteadily, and in a hoarse voice, "Come, let's hev glasses round. It's a long time since I stood treat. Bumpers, Mrs. Farrar, twice round if any one hes a mind. An' here's to him as is first to set Staneby church-bells a ringin'." So saying the blacksmith put his empty glass to his lips, and moved them, parched and dry though they were, as if some liquid were passing between them, until the glass was

tilted, and he made as though he were draining it to its last drop. Then he set it down on the table, and, throwing some silver upon Mrs. Farrar's tray, rose suddenly to his feet, and, pressing his hat down over his eyes, stepped out of the circle, and, going with long strides across the kitchen, paused at the door with a momentary recollection of what he was doing. Then, with a "Here's to ye," and a wave of his hand, he stepped out of the warmth and brightness into the chill starlit night.

"Why, he's drunk."

It was the butcher who said this, almost before the door had closed on Matthew Tindale. And the exclamation was followed by others of a like nature from most of the men.

"It's not what he's hed here, let me tell ye," called out Mrs. Farrar, in her shrill voice. "He's hed but two glasses. Mattha takes care never to swallow very much of *his* money."

"Well, he's drunk, any way," repeated the

butcher ; and this time half a dozen voices reiterated the words. Soon the conversation drifted into other channels, and Matthew was forgotten.

But the shoemaker sat silently brooding over his own thoughts. He had not joined in the general outcry of surprise, when the men, noting Matthew's pallid face and strange expression, and connecting it in their minds with his extraordinary behaviour and abrupt exit, had laid it to the charge of drunkenness. He did not believe him to be drunk. He felt that another and a deeper reason must be assigned for such emotion as he had seen depicted during the evening on Matthew's face. The visible disquietude of his manner when Sidney Aschenburg was mentioned ; the excited way in which he had combated the suggestion of murder ; and, lastly, the effect of the charge which Neddy, without any belief in its truthfulness, had put forward as if in jest, had awakened the shoemaker's suspicions. Was it possible, he asked himself, that Mr.

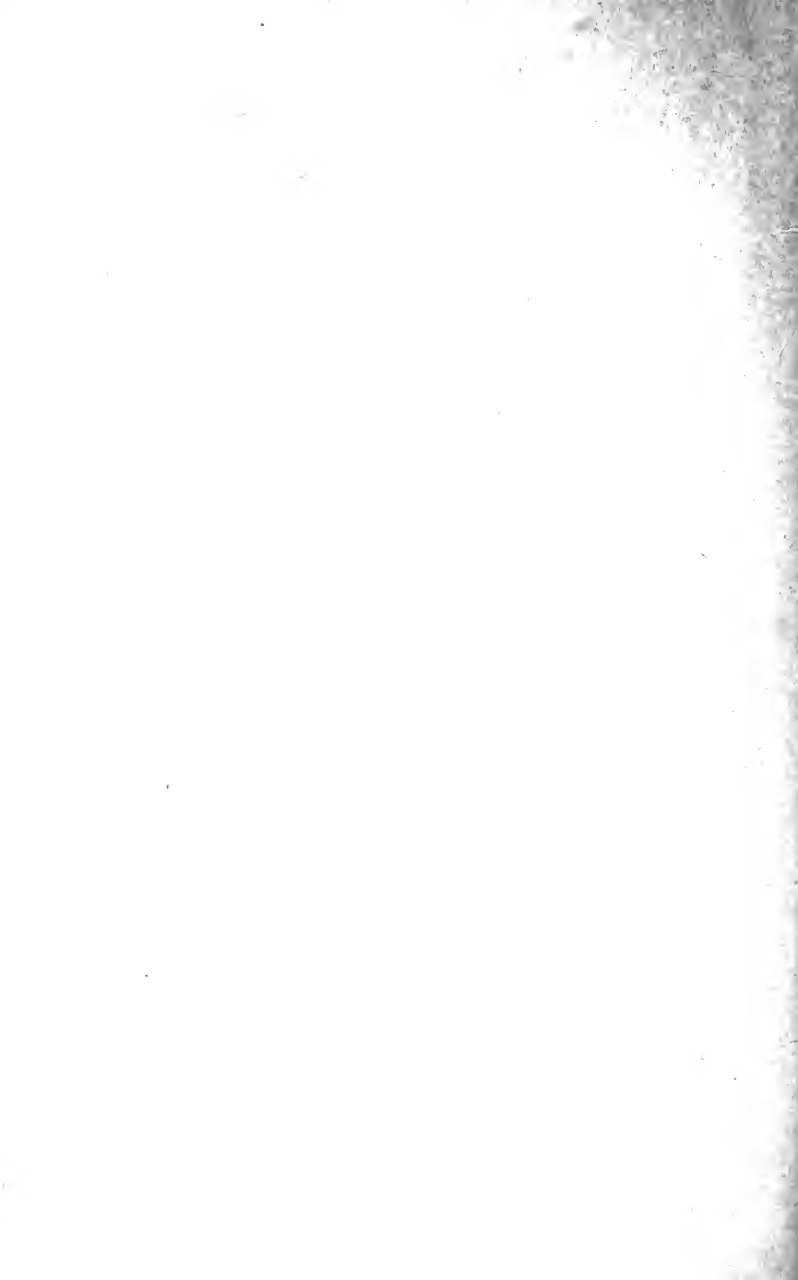
Sidney Aschenburg's death had really been a violent one? Could it be possible that the young man had some enemy who, meeting him upon the path in his own woods, had taken the opportunity of throwing him over? But Mr. Sidney Aschenburg was tall and muscular, and it would have taken a man of great physical strength to have been able to accomplish such a task.

Here Neddy Kendal's thoughts turned upon Matthew. Matthew could have done it, he told himself; Matthew was strong enough and powerful enough to throw any man of Mr. Aschenburg's size and weight into the river. And, with a start, Neddy asked himself whether it were possible that Matthew *had* done it? Then there followed quickly a succession of recollections. Was it not the very night of young Mr. Aschenburg's disappearance that he had seen Matthew in the Derthwaite woods? Had he not been startled by the whiteness of the blacksmith's face as he lifted it up in the moonlight? And—here

the shoemaker's heart gave a sudden leap in his bosom, and then beat in convulsive throbs —had he not seen a dark stain on one side of Matthew's mouth, together with a swelling of the upper lip?

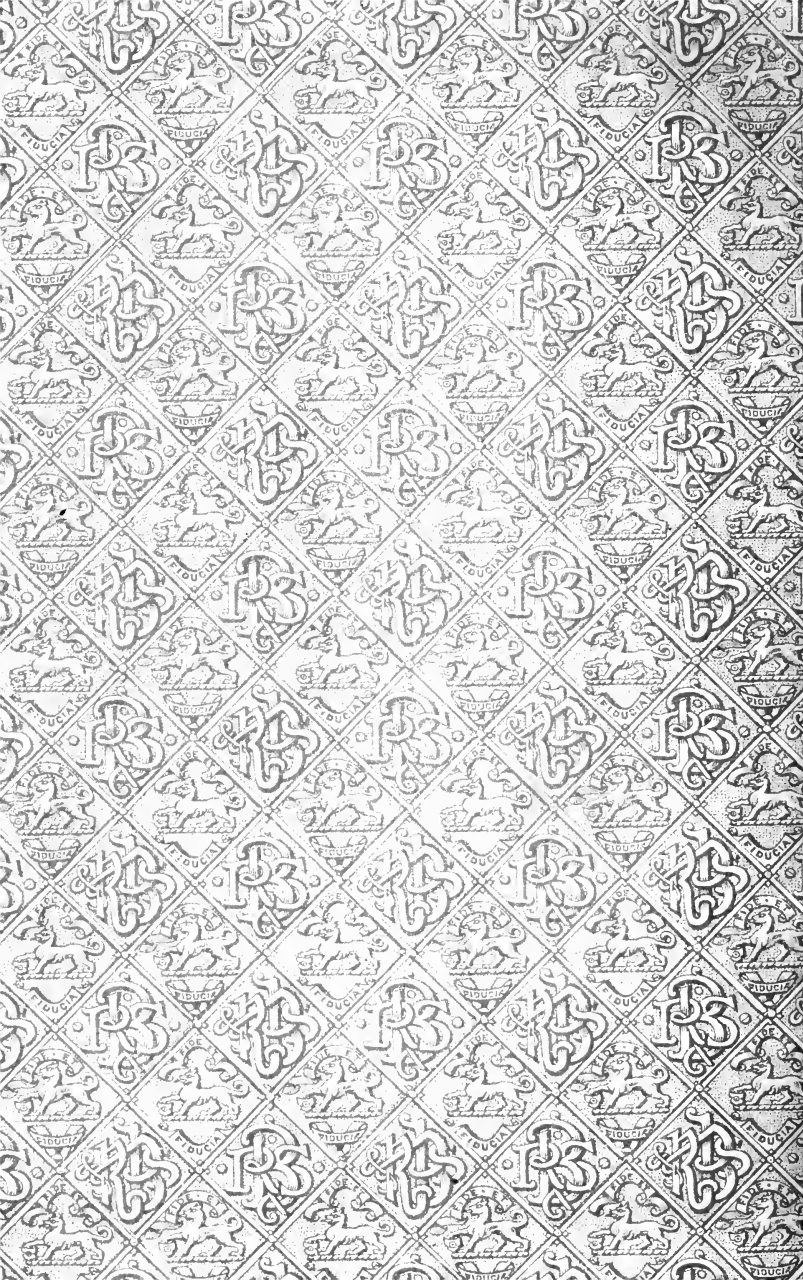
The shoemaker sat lost in his reflections; a sardonic smile at times upon his face. A noble nature had fallen, so he believed, and the thought filled his heart with joy.

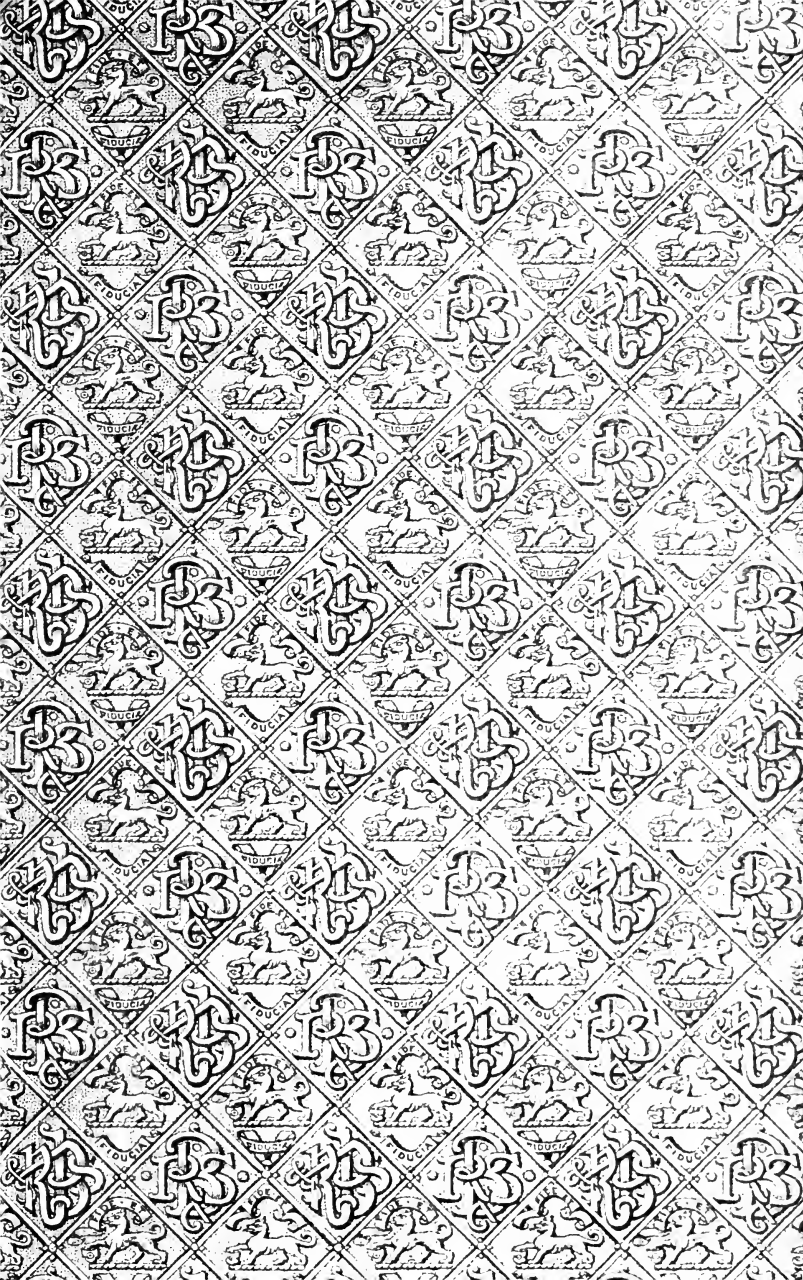
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